

MULTIPLICITY AND CONTRADICTION

A Literature Review of Trans* Studies in Religion

Siobhan M. Kelly

As trans* studies gains traction in gender and feminist studies, it has also begun to inflect the academic study of religion. This essay serves as a literature review of trans* studies in religion to date, beginning with a brief overview of trans* studies' nascence. Kelly then focuses on five main areas of trans* studies in religion: biographical study, autotheoretical analysis, critiques of cultural imperialism's impact on gender, work on intersex, and gender theory and its applications. The author encounters multiple texts within each subsection, giving a breadth of the work available, alongside questions of where each could go next, as well as potential pitfalls that come from such an approach. Kelly ends with a pitch for trans* studies in religion to pay close attention to multiplicity and contradiction, notions by no means new to the study of religion more broadly.

Keywords: gender theory, queer studies, transgender studies

The field of trans* studies began making inroads in gender/queer theory and studies by the early 1990s, but within the field of religion, progress toward this (sub)discipline's place, acceptance, and legitimacy has been a much slower journey.¹ However, trans* studies is beginning to enter religious studies, as religious studies itself begins to develop and negotiate its own language and topics

¹ Sometimes, this field is called *trans studies* or *transgender studies*. I follow the lead of University of Arizona's 2016 Trans*studies Conference, using the asterisk to denote an openness to a wide variety of embodiments, practices, and methodological approaches.

of focus surrounding subjects gendered and sexed as other, and the theoretical contributions that come from attending to such voices.

Thus far, trans* studies in religion has coalesced into five major categories. First, trans* studies in religion encompasses works that explore individual people and the intersection of their religious, spiritual, and sex and gender experiences. These are, loosely, biographical studies of trans* people and their religious experience.² Some of these texts look to reclaim—or claim for the first time—popular religious figures as trans*, a way of thinking in many ways pioneered by Leslie Feinberg. This work looks to religious figures such as Joan of Arc, using their religious and gender experiences as confirmation of the trans-historicity of trans*. Feinberg says of Joan of Arc, “the church and France buried the fact that she was a transvestite—an expression of her identity she was willing to die for rather than renounce,” thus instrumentalizing a historical figure to legitimate identity categories that did not exist during the given figure’s lifetime.³ Secondly, trans* studies in religion includes autobiographical and autotheoretical work, which uses one’s own experience of gender and sexual difference as a jumping-off point for religious exploration. This category encompasses a large portion of contemporary trans* studies in religion, and includes individual works by Jakob Hero, Justin Tanis, and Joy Ladin as well as multiple anthologies. Third, critiques of cultural imperialism’s influence look to figurations of the gendered and sexed “other” and the impact of Western mores on these figurations. This category includes innovative work in Native American studies on what are known as “Two Spirit” communities, work on Indian *hijra* communities, and much more. Fourth, work dealing with issues of intersex individuals underscores the religious and philosophical challenges and opportunities that come from wrestling with physical difference that unseats the traditional, binary sex understanding upon which much of Western religious history is formed. Last, there is work that is considered, most broadly, gender/queer/feminist theory, that takes the nonnormatively gendered and sexed as a source for critical theoretical discourse and exploration alongside the existing canon of critical theory and philosophy. Thinkers such as Ann Pellegrini, Amy Hollywood, Mark Jordan, Gayle Salamon, and Afsaneh Najmabadi make up this final group.

In this literature review, I first give a very brief and altogether incomplete overview of trans* studies as a (sub)discipline, focusing on its foundational texts. Moving from there into the field of religious studies, I outline the five categories listed above. However, the partitions reflect a way to describe work both in the

² It is crucial to understand that the term *trans** and its offshoots are all relatively new and Western terms, and some of these figures predate the current lexicon or explicitly eschew it.

³ Leslie Feinberg, “Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 212.

study of religion and within trans* studies writ large, and the categories fail to maintain strict differentiation in places (like many forms of categorization). By way of a conclusion, I point to areas of further exploration and potential future work, in an attempt to sketch only a few of many possible futures for robust work in trans* studies in religion.

Trans* Studies: An Overview

Two figures reign supreme within the nascence of trans* studies: Susan Stryker and Sandy Stone. Stone was the target of vitriol from trans*-exclusive feminist thinker Janice Raymond, whose *Transsexual Empire* stated the case for a feminism built upon binary sexual and gender differentiation to the exclusion of trans* people. To accomplish this, Raymond looked to Stone, a trans woman who was involved in a women-only recording collective, Olivia Records, as an example of how, “in the case of the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists their whole presence becomes a ‘member’ invading women’s presence and dividing us once more from each other.”⁴ Stone responded to this book in her 1987 essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” which followed from Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto.”⁵ Stone simultaneously outlined the arguments at work in medical communities granting access to gender-affirming biomedical interventions and those at work in feminist groups. She posited “constituting transsexuals not as a class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a *genre*—a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.”⁶ Stone wanted to use trans* experience and discourse to upend the capitalist, Western hegemonic notions of gender and sex dualism, to write a manifesto of a future beyond these limiting structures. She opened up space for intelligibility beyond heteronormative and binary understandings of gender and sex, and intelligibility for “the transsexuals for whom gender identity is something different from *and perhaps irrelevant to* physical genitalia,” who “are occulted by those for whom the power of the medical/psychological establishments, and their ability to act as gatekeepers for cultural norms, is the final authority for what counts as a culturally intelligible body.”⁷ While Raymond drew from and thanked a cadre of important feminist thinkers, including the study of religion’s own Mary Daly, as well as Adrienne Rich and Andrea

⁴ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 104.

⁵ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in Stryker and Whittle, *Transgender Studies Reader*; and Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ Stone, “Empire Strikes Back,” 231, emphasis added.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.

Dworkin, Stone also clearly outlined her academic forbears, including Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Gloria Anzaldúa.⁸

Following Stone's move to open up the discourse of feminist and gender studies to explicitly answer to and with trans* people and studies, Susan Stryker in 1993 delivered her pathbreaking paper, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." Stryker saw the experiences of being a transgender person as intimately tied to the affect of rage and notions of performance and performativity, which motivate political action. Her words rang out with a timeless, resonant fury that remains a cornerstone of trans* theory: "I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster."⁹ Stryker's own career, as a documentary filmmaker, critical theorist, trans* historian, teacher, coeditor of both volumes of *The Transgender Studies Reader*, founding editor of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, and leader of University of Arizona's Transgender Studies Initiative, cemented her in many ways as the field's guiding light. As she said about trans* studies, "it is an interdisciplinary field that draws upon the social sciences and psychology, the physical and life sciences, and the humanities and arts," that is "as concerned with material conditions as it is with representations practices, and often pays particularly close attention to the interface between the two."¹⁰ Stryker has pointed to the many directions in which trans* studies can go, and one such direction is into the academic study of religion.

Moving forward, I look to the parts of this field explicitly connected to the study of religion.¹¹ However, much of the work that falls outside this category has particularly salient applications to our field: namely, it gives us a way to think about how groups form, how identitarian politics harm and help, and how to (attempt to) do ethical ethnographic study. Trans* studies includes work that intends to shed light on historical moments and figures that represent what Michel Foucault called "subjugated knowledge," a term picked up by Stryker in two ways in her essay "(De)Subjugated Knowledges." On the one hand, such knowledge is concerned with "historical contents that have been masked or buried in functional coherences or formal stylizations."¹² On the other, it involves "the politics of community involvement," or in Foucault's words, "the knowledges that have been disqualified by the hierarchies of erudition and

⁸ Raymond, *Transsexual Empire*, viii, ix; and Stone, "Empire Strikes Back," 230, 232, 233.

⁹ Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," in Stryker and Whittle, *Transgender Studies Reader*, 246.

¹⁰ Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in Stryker and Whittle, *Transgender Studies Reader*, 3.

¹¹ Because the work of Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (especially *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* [Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2001]) is featured in this issue's Across Generations, I do not discuss her contributions to the field here.

¹² Quoted in Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," 12.

science.”¹³ The following five categories all map onto these fields of knowledges in overlapping ways. Biographical exploration, critiques of cultural imperialism’s reach and impact, and intersex thought all draw from archival explorations and excavation of pasts, presents, and futures that were removed from the realm of academic study until very recently. Self-writing and critical theoretical conversations each upend academic expectations in favor of “singular local knowledges,” as do much of the work in non-Western and intersex milieus.¹⁴ I chart these subfields of exploration in trans* studies in religion: however, the conversation is ever growing, and any attempt at clear and unchanging demarcations must be bracketed by the knowledge that they falter and fail to adequately contain both bodies and texts.

Trans* Studies in Religion: Biographical Exploration

Much scholarly attention has focused on people who have experienced sex and gender variance alongside compelling religious and/or spiritual journeys, and what we can learn from them. Published in 2017, Jacob Lau and Cameron Partridge edited and introduced *Out of the Ordinary: A Life of Gender and Spiritual Transitions*, the autobiography of Michael Dillon/Lobzang Jivaka. Dillon/Jivaka, widely believed to be the first trans man to have a phalloplasty, “transitioned” even before Christine Jorgensen, who was not the first but perhaps the first widely known transgender person. Dillon/Jivaka, a medical doctor, wrote what is widely considered the first study of transsexuality, *Self: A Study in Endocrinology and Ethics*, well before Harry Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon*.¹⁵ In an astute introduction, Partridge and Lau chart his life, from childhood in England, through college and medical school, and on to a career as a ship doctor. After being outed in the British press as having undergone a sex transition, he settled in India to train as a Tibetan Buddhist monastic novice. They introduce Dillon/Jivaka’s own words, letting him speak for himself while pointing to sites for potential questioning and exploration. They say, “we are presented with an extraordinary series crossings—of gender, nation, class, and ethnicity, and of religion—even as Dillon/Jivaka accounts neither for his imperialist positionality to ‘export’ Buddhism nor for his prevailing orientalist attitude toward his fellow novices.”¹⁶ While biographies of Dillon/Jivaka exist, his own memoir has never before been published, and Lau and Partridge, “hope that its richness and complexity—its humanity—can now be assessed, critiqued, and

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁵ Michael Dillon/Lobzang Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary: A Life of Gender and Spiritual Transitions*, ed. Jacob Lau and Cameron Partridge (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 6–7; and Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian, 1966).

¹⁶ Dillon/Jivaka, *Out of the Ordinary*, 19.

appreciated for what it is.”¹⁷ The unearthing of Dillon/Jivaka’s life opens up space for conversations following from this work and also testifies to the importance of telling one’s own story, in one’s own words—a theme central to the next subgroup of trans* studies in religion scholarship, self-writing.

Another subject of some such exploration is Pauli Murray, among the first female Episcopal priests and a titan of the Civil Rights movement. Doreen Drury is especially careful in her discussion, as “claiming Murray as representative of gender and sexual identity categories, such as transgender or lesbian, too often obscures the role of family history as well as racism, sexism, and economic injustice in shaping aspirations and desires.”¹⁸ As “Murray came to live and think in many ways *against* identities,” she refused the terms lesbian and transgender for herself.¹⁹ Murray attempted to locate a biological cause for her masculine presentation and attraction to women, and when that failed she settled on using alternate descriptors, like “‘a creature,’ ‘an organism,’ and otherworldly terms like ‘Pixie,’” eschewing gendered language in favor of creative formations.²⁰ Drury ends the essay saying Murray’s life does the work of “reminding us of the need to imaginatively disrupt the certainty of identities as we challenge the power of systems that trap and sideline.”²¹

Each of these pieces draws from something hard to pin down in its ubiquity in queer scholarship: the archive, especially as Ann Cvetkovich describes an “archive of feeling,” which are “repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.”²² Dillon/Jivaka’s manuscript sat unpublished for over a half century, and the terms Drury relays are found in Murray’s unpublished papers held at Harvard University’s Schlesinger Library archives. This unearthing desubjugates knowledge of past figures, which Foucault and Stryker show as key to trans* studies.

Foucault was intimately familiar with this, having published the nineteenth-century memoirs of Herculine Barbin, whose experience of gender and sex was intimately shaped by life in sex-segregated female religious schools, first as a student and then as teacher. Religious roles and experiences provided a site for gender and sex exploration, in Murray’s desire to be Father Murray and in Dillon/Jivaka’s multiple crossings, which gain him access to a monk lifestyle that confirmed his maleness.²³ For Herculine, life in a female single-sex

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Doreen M. Drury, “Boy-Girl, Imp, Priest: Pauli Murray and the Limits of Identity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1 (2013): 142–47, quotation on 142.

¹⁹ Ibid., 143.

²⁰ Ibid., 147.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ann Cvetkovitch, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 7.

²³ Drury, “Boy-Girl, Imp, Priest,” 146.

world allowed for intimacy and sexual exploration with women, and for Barbin's read-as-masculine secondary sex characteristics to go largely unquestioned due to the structures surrounding them. Much work has been done on the ways religious communities have hidden homosexual activity beneath the surface—Sister Benedetta Carlini's life and the numbers of believed homosexual priests as two examples, or those ex-nuns who met in the convent and got married that seem to dot the catholic landscape of my own life.²⁴ These recent works show not only that sexual and intimate play and exploration is at work in such communities but that they also become sites for gender play and for gender and sex variant people to “hide in plain sight,” as it were. Mark Jordan points out in *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* the “clichéd comparison between Catholic liturgy and drag,” coining the term *liturgical drag* in the process to showcase this type of exploration as connection to religious life.²⁵ Religious performance of gender, and the intersections of religiosity and gender exploration thus become sites for further work.

Autotheoretical, Autobiographical, and Self-Writing in Trans* Studies in Religion

Autotheoretical and autobiographical writing comes to the fore in trans* studies both within and outside of religion. Stryker points out the singular, experiential knowledge that comes from trans* life: “precisely the kind of knowledge that transgender people, whether academically trained or not, have of their own embodied experience, and of their relationships to the discourses and institutions that act upon and through them.”²⁶ The trans* studies texts most often heralded as pathbreaking and canonical, as well as the few texts that transcend the academy into popular culture, are almost universally found within this genre.²⁷ The push toward trans* auto-theory in religion performs multiple, ambivalent functions. On the one hand, these discourses productively problematize the staid forms of writing traditionally viewed as the *only* way to write academically. On the other hand, this confessional way of academic writing cements the requirement of both certain identity labels and an amount of experiential disclosure to gain access to the field of trans* studies—to become a trans* theorist, one must be a certain (read: legible and public) kind of trans*. Different thinkers have balanced the need for social, legal, and emotional legibility that

²⁴ Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

²⁵ Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 17.

²⁶ Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” 13.

²⁷ Most recently, this occurred with Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf, 2015).

personal writing and disclosure brings with both the desire to problematize identity labels as a concept and the requirement to do “this kind” of theory from a specific standpoint.

Jakob Hero takes personal experience as a jumping-off point for explicitly theological reflections in “Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency.” Hero writes personal reflection on his “transition process” and its practical aspects, which then influences his theological musings.²⁸ He calls for us to embrace a queer theology of flourishing tied to a reimagination of one’s experience of gender as a site of great dignity. However, he warns us, “the paths one takes through the processes of transition are often mistakenly seen as salvific. Although it is a secular manifestation, this reflects a familiar theological trope. A broken being, made monstrous in a disgustingly flawed embodiment, is freed from bondage.”²⁹ He calls instead for us to recognize a cooperative, co-creative and continuous relationship with God toward becoming our fullest selves, where we help ourselves flourish alongside God, as opposed to being acted upon to become saved, in the trans* case by holders of biomedical power. Additionally, Hero’s hesitance toward salvific narrativization of medical professionals’ roles in one’s transition hints toward a resistance of a finalized, saved idea of a “post-transition” self. To begin to view trans* lives and experiences as co-creative and ongoing in perpetuity changes the narrative of transition from a staid and preconceived category to one that is dynamic and individual, a point Hero elucidates by using his own experiences of difference from the given (and medically required) narrative.³⁰

Two anthologies crystallized this form of writing as key to trans* studies in religion. The first is edited by pioneering feminist liberation theologians Lisa Isherwood and the late Marcella Althaus-Reid. *Transformations* collected work from notable scholars including Elizabeth Stuart and Susannah Cornwall, activists, and religious leaders on issues of trans* studies.³¹ While not every piece within the anthology addresses personal experience, more than half do. The work is personal, taking forms as wide ranging as a play’s text, autobiography, theory, and film studies. Second, the 2011 Lambda Literary Award for Transgender Non-Fiction winner, *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, edited by Noach Dzmura, also balances between personal story and theory.³² With a foreword by Rebecca Alpert and chapters by Kate Bornstein, Joy Ladin, Max Strassfeld, Judith Plaskow, Julia Watts-Belser,

²⁸ Jakob Hero, “Toward a Queer Theology of Flourishing: Transsexual Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Moral Agency,” in *Queer Religion: LGBT Movements and Queering Religion*, Vol. 2, ed. Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 150.

²⁹ Ibid., 162.

³⁰ Ibid., 150–51.

³¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Transformations* (London: SCM, 2009).

³² Noach Dzmura, ed., *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

and Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, this text engages with theoretical questions intrinsic to trans* studies, outlining the ways Jewish communities can and should respond to trans* people, as well as providing areas for theological and ethical exploration and Talmudic interpretation. The *mechitza*, the partition dividing men from women during worship, is something some authors balance upon, others feel forces them to one side, and others gladly cross once and stay put. The text is divided into the three pillars of Jewish life: *Gemilut Chasadim* (Acts of Lovingkindness), *Avodah* (Service), and Torah. One compelling chapter is “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” which takes the form of a *chevra* or study partnership between trans* rabbi Elliot Kukla and preeminent Jewish feminist scholar Judith Plaskow. They use Plaskow’s classic *Standing Again at Sinai* as their text of study.³³ Kukla pushes back upon Plaskow’s concern that trans* issues may unseat gender oppression as the focus of gender studies. He shows the connection between gender oppression and trans* existence, which Plaskow then takes up to show the ways that imaginations and imagery of the Divine can be aided immensely by trans* studies. She ends this collaboration by saying, “there’s an analogy between undermining the gender binary by multiplying social genders and exploding the notion of a male God by multiplying metaphors for God and our relationship with God. We can think of God as masculine, feminine, female, male, both, neither, in various combinations, and in terms that have nothing to do with gender, so that through multiplying, we dissolve.”³⁴ Plaskow comes to understand, through Kukla’s teaching, that by questioning the binary notion of gender and sex, gender and sex oppression are revealed in their truest depth and breadth, thus revealing the power of trans* studies to work against those oppressive structures.

Hero’s essay and these two anthologies show the bend of trans* studies in religion toward autobiographical and autotheoretical writings. In these cases, authors utilize their own experiences and histories to elucidate religious arguments, or simply to make the case that “we’re here and we matter” known for trans* religious and spiritual practitioners. However, if this approach becomes the *only* approach or remains a dominant approach, then it is possible that precisely what Hero warns against will occur. A self-focused trans* studies in religion runs the risk of becoming salvific, limiting those who can do trans* studies to those who pass a certain confessional litmus test, which simultaneously requires disclosure and adherence to a given narrative idea of a trans* life in the first place. These authors all show the ways that, in different genres, autotheoretical work can be instrumentalized, much like feminist standpoint theory, and

³³ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990).

³⁴ Judith Plaskow and Elliot Kukla, “Remapping the Road from Sinai,” in *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community*, ed. Noach Dzmura (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 140.

that such work can and must stand alongside other forms of academic writing that take different approaches.

Who Counts as Trans*? Critiques of Cultural Imperialism's Impact on Gender

A major vein of thought on issues that can be construed as trans* studies exists within thought that critiques the influence of cultural imperialism on gender mores. Afsaneh Najmabadi's ethnographic and historical study of transsexuality in Iran, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, continues her work on the intersection of religious, social, legal, and medical discourses around gender, sex, and sexuality. She shows how Iran's policies of allowing and sometimes funding trans* biomedical interventions stems from its attempts to root out homosexuality. Ethnographic subjects speak of instrumentalizing "sex change" protocols in order to stay in relationships that were seen by the state as homosexual and thus illegal, and the intersection of religious and cultural imperatives, such as marriage, upon their decision-making. Additionally, Najmabadi traces queer/trans*/feminist activism in Iran, showing the ways that such work is (re)forming the ways Iran thinks and talks about sex, gender, and sexuality. She uses her introduction to speak to the challenges of ethnographic research of trans* subjects, realizing that "the creative playfulness of trans individuals' self-subjection gets lost in the process of archivization."³⁵ Najmabadi's deft, albeit brief, overview of the challenges of translation within that introduction is a must-read, for students of gender and sex, of post-, de-, and anti-colonial thought, and of cultural studies. She shows the ways in which some parts of some narratives echoed the stories she heard in her years in the United States, while at other times, how the questions she asked fell upon confused and uncertain ears. Indeed, the narratives she retells occasionally echo those that Hero and others working within a Western religious context tell. Najmabadi balances religious and social constructs alongside medicolegal ones, weaving together a story whose importance to trans* studies in religion cannot be overstated.

The issue of translation, and the imparting of Western notions of gender and sex on to other contexts, was not lost on Stryker in the essay wherein she introduced trans* studies. According to Stryker:

The conflation of many types of gender variance into the single short-hand term "transgender," particularly when this collapse into a single genre of personhood crosses the boundaries that divide the West from the rest of the world, holds both peril and promise. It is far too easy

³⁵ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 14.

to assimilate non-Western configurations of personhood into Western constructs of sexuality and gender, in a manner that recapitulates the power structures of colonialism. “Transgender” is, without a doubt, a category of First World origin that is currently being exported for Third World consumption.³⁶

Najmabadi describes the untranslatability and specificity of “*jins*,” which comes up time and again as the term that “linguistically and culturally kept” the categories of “sexual/gender identification, desire, and practices” together in Iran.³⁷ When language does not line up, neither will the identities and experiences that are constituted (at least in part) through language. Work on *hijra* communities in India echoes this. Gayatri Reddy’s 2005 text, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South Asia* remains the definitive study of *hijras*. *Hijras* occupy a space between and outside of the male-female dichotomy and “are not just a sexual or gendered category,” as they also perform religious and cultural duties.³⁸ Through the process of British colonialism and Western influence on modern discourses, conversation surrounding the *hijra* has conflated them with transgender individuals.

Reddy’s study shows how *hijras*, which she says, “have existed in Hyderabad at least since the birth of the city,” speak within the group and to outsiders with gendered language: “Hijra, in their conversations, use [gendered pronouns] randomly and indiscriminately to refer to individual hijra. They insist, however, that people outside their community refer to hijras in the feminine gender.”³⁹ Reddy also outlines the ways that this group’s self-understanding shifts in relation to colonialism:

[The British Criminal Tribes Act of 1871] called for the “registration, surveillance, and control of certain tribes and eunuchs . . . by the early twentieth century, many sections of this act were extended to the whole of British India. Under this act, the term *eunuch* was “deemed to include all persons of the male sex who admit themselves, or on medical inspection clearly appear to be impotent . . . [or] appear, dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place . . . [or] dance or play music, or take part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” 14.

³⁷ Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 7–8.

³⁸ Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9; and Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijra of India* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990), xvii.

⁴⁰ Collection of Acts Passed by the Governor-General of India in Council of the Year 1871, quoted in Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 26–27.

Some scholars, including Serena Nanda, portray *hijras* as a third gender. More recently, *hijras* have become legally categorized as transgender in some areas. For example, when Tamil Nadu added a third gender category to its social-service ration cards, the letter they used to denote this category, which is to be used by *hijras* who previously did not have a box, was T. The T in this case stands for transgender, and ostensibly includes people who identify as such, as well.⁴¹ Reddy refutes each of these approaches, saying that “this simple reductionism does not really reflect the range of identities that crosscuts this [sexual and gender difference] space and the plurality of differences that go into constructing these individuals’ lives.”⁴²

Here, Western binary notions of sex, along with the ways that sex, gender, and sexuality all rub off and impact one another, is shown to have tendrils of influence across the globe through cultural imperialism. Gender-variant communities are communicating with each other and the outside world in creative ways, all while negotiating shifting relationships to religious and spiritual roles. Important work on the ways that Native American communities navigate these changing notions can be found in the work of Wesley Thomas and others in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*.⁴³ More recently, Mark Rifkin’s *When Did Indians Become Straight?* asks similar questions as Najmabadi’s and Reddy’s works, about the ways that culture, religion/spirituality, and legal systems (and specifically colonially imposed legal systems) impact the identity, performance, and embodiment of gender and sex.⁴⁴ These categories and their representations will continue to shift over time, as globalization continues, and Western trans* narratives are proliferated. Here again, the worry of autobiographical work becoming prescriptive rears its head, in the ways specific types of (white) (binary) (able-bodied) (identity-based) (medically prescribed and dictated) trans* experiences, if seen as the “norm” or, more dangerously, as the “only,” have wide-ranging, global impacts.

Intersex Thought and Religious Studies

Before beginning this section, I feel it necessary to clarify that my desire is not in any way to convolute trans* and intersex experiences into a singular, muddled voice—they are neither distinct nor monolithic even as separate groups. However, as these approaches (and groups) often find themselves in conversation with one another, I choose to not stifle that relationship and to

⁴¹ Morgan Harrington, “The Rationing of Rights,” *Tehelka*, April 19, 2008.

⁴² Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 58.

⁴³ Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, eds., *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

instead look at the ways that intersex thought and theology are asking similar questions as trans* theory and theology and to look for thought on the body that takes these discourses, as well as disability, womanist, *mujerista*, and postcolonial theological and theoretical voices, into consideration to the fullest—to see these discourses not as mutually exclusive, but co-constitutive of each other. Cheryl Chase's essay "Hermaphrodites with Attitude" outlines the overlapping interests between trans* and intersex activists:

As unwilling subjects of science and improper subjects of feminism, politicized intersex activists have deep stakes in allying with and participating in the sorts of poststructuralist cultural work that exposes the foundational assumptions about personhood shared by the dominant society, conventional feminism, and many other identity-based oppositional social movements. We have a stake, too, in the efforts of gender queers to carve out livable social spaces for reconfigured forms of embodiment, identity, and desire.⁴⁵

I follow Chase's lead, seeing this piece as a way to highlight multiple approaches to such carving, while simultaneously recognizing that as such work is undertaken, our held understandings of identity categories, including our own, may begin to look fuzzier and fuzzier. Bodily difference is recognized without recourse to identitarian mores or value judgments, and difference and particularity are recognized in their fullest and most robust senses, expanding beyond our held assumptions of sex, gender, and the body more broadly.

Susannah Cornwall has recently come to the fore as a major voice in the study of intersex as a category and the theological ramifications that come from a worldview not based in sexed binarism. Cornwall gives a background on how the category of intersex came to be, and existing research and theology around this (which is scant) in her book *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*. As bodily metaphors have come to be used to describe both statehood and religious groups, those whose bodies deviate from the norm in any way become seen as pathogenic threats to their well-being. Cornwall interrogates Christian body theology, including that of Karl Barth, to show the ways that these approaches have shut out experiences from those sexed-as-other, and how they have instead been instrumentalized to make theological points. She says, "theologies which claim an immovable model of male and female, masculine and feminine (which also happens to outlaw homosexuality), and which allow no conceptual space for exceptions, risk 'protecting' and fetishizing a truth which does not exist in the first place."⁴⁶ Cornwall draws intersex theology out in relation to trans* theology,

⁴⁵ Cheryl Chase, "Hermaphrodites with Attitude: Mapping the Emergence of Intersex Political Activism," in Stryker and Whittle, *Transgender Studies Reader*, 313.

⁴⁶ Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010), 158.

disability theology, and queer theology, each of which deal in different ways with bodies marked as other, with aspects of choice and non-choice stamped upon them, and all of which often are seen as “less than.” For disabled and intersex people, “physical ‘abnormalities’ are only disadvantageous if society is structured” in a way that highlights and weaponizes difference—through “imposed norms—which become moral imperatives.”⁴⁷ Cornwall’s text lays groundwork for new work including intersex in the study of religion, for “the erasure of a whole swathe of bodies and experiences demands a theological response motivated not by fear but by a desire to expand the ways in which human lives and bodies tell stories.”⁴⁸ Megan DeFranza’s 2015 *Sex Difference in Christian Theology* continued this conversation, placing Cornwall’s ideas into Catholic and evangelical Christian terms, while also pointing toward a Christian futurity not based in sex binarism.⁴⁹

Theory Minded: Gender Theory and questions of Trans* Studies in Religion

While I have focused on the ways that thematic differences exist in trans* thought in religion, we cannot overlook the fact that trans* studies also crosses (sub)disciplinary boundaries. Work has ranged from ethnographic study, historical analysis, theology, literary studies, scriptural studies, and beyond. The final of the five thematic differences, gender theory, looks to the ways that this vein of critical theory, and its place within religion, has (perhaps implicitly) been dealing with many of the issues that come up in trans* studies in religion elsewhere. This subdiscipline provides new ways of thinking gender and sex in relation to religion and its practices.⁵⁰

Amy Hollywood’s work on gender and sex in the Middle Ages is a major intervention in gender theory that harkens us to look simultaneously backward and forward in religious studies, to see what people have done before and what that may mean for us here and now. Hollywood’s “‘That Glorious Slit’: Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ’s Side Wound,” resists “[Luce] Irigaray’s thought and its potentially essentializing and heterosexist connotations.”⁵¹ The relationship between believers and Jesus’s side wound are intensely affectionate:

⁴⁷ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁴⁹ Megan DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

⁵⁰ This subdiscipline often overlaps with the first four areas of study. For example, much of Najmabadi’s theoretical arguments show a deep understanding of trans* studies and where her research fits into the existing scene.

⁵¹ Amy Hollywood, “‘That Glorious Slit’: Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ’s Side Wound,” in *Luce Irigaray and Premodern Culture: Thresholds of History*, ed. Theresa Krier and Elizabeth D. Harvey (London: Routledge, 2004), 106.

“Instructed in religious literature to taste, suck, kiss, and enter into Christ’s side wound,” and represented as vaginal, this leads to erotic relations with this ambiguously gendered Christ, who at once is the male Son of God and the penetrated, vaginal object of desire.⁵² Hollywood resists ideas of the feminine/femaleness as associated with woundedness, while still leaving room for the imagery to be maternal, painful, erotic, homosexual, and multigendered/sexed, whereby “the instability of gendered positions within medieval devotional and mystical images and practices works to destabilize” normative frameworks.⁵³ We see how one such community engaged in complex gender and sex play in relation to divinity and material objects of devotion, giving us a new lens through which to interrogate our present time and the existing corpus of gender and feminist theory.

In *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Hollywood explicitly wrestles with binary sexual difference and the possibilities that exist outside of this hegemonic formulation. She says, “such binaries offer an inadequate account of the multiplicity of sexed bodily experience and, thus, are potentially exclusionary.”⁵⁴ She sees the political, personal, and theoretical importance of such work, and thus calls for attention to multiplicity. As early as 2002, Hollywood was calling for attention to the specificity of both sex and sexuality, over and above the common move in gender theory to conflate the two: “although sex difference and sexuality are currently inextricably tied together, they can and should be analytically separated; only through this kind of separation can we begin to understand the multiplicity of actual bodies and desires.”⁵⁵ Hollywood’s corpus provides countless insights into how to think bodies and philosophies together, and her work stands as an important inroad for trans* studies in religion.

Mark Jordan’s work highlights what is central to possible paths forward for trans* studies in religion—contradiction, oversignification, camp, and bodily exuberance. In the festschrift in honor of Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots*, which he coedited alongside Lisa Isherwood, Jordan’s aphoristic, imitative, dare-I-say-campy “Notes on Camp Theology” is an important work to trans* studies in religion. Jordan mimics the stylization of Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” taking the Modernist form of a numbered manifesto to show what happens when we (explicitly) introduce camp to theology. Camp is a sensibility tied up in drag and gender performance, making it at once erotically appealing and off limits to trans* studies. Jordan points out that “the effort to avoid camping camp enacts its

⁵² Ibid., 113.

⁵³ Ibid., 120.

⁵⁴ Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 232.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 343–34.

own parody of seriousness, does a drag version of the theorist,” so, instead, he avoids *avoiding* camping camp—that is, he camps it all.⁵⁶ Jordan goes on to speak of drag and Althaus-Reid, and her desire to “go out as a female impersonator of the Virgin of Guadalupe,” highlighting the erotic, confusing, and liberating power of oversignification and doubling.⁵⁷ Jordan discusses the merits of drag and camp as a kind of ritualistic, salvific church, alongside images of home and sexual lives that carry with them contradictions and (dis)continuities within myriad gender forms. He says, “an unnatural love that confers an identity: camp is Sontag’s easy code for homoerotic desire,” and follows up by noting that “an identity conferred by camp could only be an ironic identity, identity as a tease.”⁵⁸ Jordan teases the reader along with such contradictory juxtapositions, of Modernism with Christian liturgy, of Sontag with Althaus-Reid, for camp theology “requires mismatches. It imagines rupture.”⁵⁹ “Camp is transverse desire,” he says, “paradoxical devotion—or devotion to the paradoxical,” such as, say, a confusing and arousing combination of gender and sex significations contained within a singular body, or within multiple bodies engaging in a confusing and arousing combination of gender and sex activities together: it is “a discourse of excess.”⁶⁰ He ends this essay recognizing that “every altar is a camp altar. The one in your living room is just more inventive—and so more erotic.”⁶¹ For Jordan, it is about a devout life of the body, of attention to private experience and public spectacle, of religious doctrine communicated in “religious ritual” and/as “sexual scenes associated with fetish play.”⁶² While some may see camp as an outdated, gay-male-aesthete-sensibility, I wonder instead about what in our light-in-the-loafers forebears we might see in ourselves, in our multiple, contradictory, and ever-changing embodiments—regardless of seemingly disparate identity labels. *Here* lies a hope for trans* studies in religion—to give us a language of transcendent, erotic multiplicity and particularity, of “body-mediated knowledge” alongside high theory alongside historical study alongside attendance to the forces of imperialism.⁶³

⁵⁶ Mark D. Jordan, “Notes on Camp Theology,” in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots: Essays in Honour of Marcella Althaus-Reid*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Mark D. Jordan (London: SCM, 2010), 186.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 185–86.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶³ Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 218.

I want to end with an image from Stryker's "Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism":

I wander one night into the dungeon's back room to find a writhing young body upright and spread-eagled, lashed naked to an X-shaped Saint Andrew's Cross, its head shaved, its scalp encircled with a garland of temporary hypodermic-needle piercings through which a fine steel wire had been woven and tightened into a "crown of thorns." Blood trickled down its face in an art-historical *tableau vivant* of martyrdom and plucked arhythmically onto a plastic drop-cloth. A woman faced the young body, checking its pulse and respiration with a latex-gloved hand, wiping the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears from its eyes and giving it occasional sips of water.⁶⁴

This image—of a bleeding, crucified, crowned body being cared for—elicits images of Jesus, both strung up on the cross and being offered vinegar from a sponge, and of his dead body being held by Mary in another art-historical scene, the Pietà. For Stryker and the body in this scene, SM dungeons became a site of personal gender exploration, leading to moments of intimacy and sustained relationality and affection. Trans* studies has the ability to show us religious, spiritual, and philosophical communities outside traditional churches, and sometimes in the places one least expects (say, a dungeon). It also shows us gender and sex exploration and play in those traditional religious structures with new clarity. It gives us a glimpse into lives of contradictory experiences and beliefs that religious studies scholars are all too familiar with, of confusing and ecstatic and transformational humanity. Trans* studies offers us a new language to talk about ineffable experiences, and trans* studies in religion complicates staid notions of self and other, divinity, and identity in a way that, I believe, has the potential to reinvigate the academic study of religion as a whole.

Siobhan Kelly is a doctoral candidate specializing in religion, gender, and culture at Harvard University. Their work draws from queer theory, transgender studies, and critical theory to study religious rhetoric in identity construction and embodiment. Kelly is interested specifically in how performance art and self-writing have both questioned and reified our contemporary understanding of "identity" and "the body." Kelly received a BA in religion from Tufts University and an MTS from Harvard Divinity School. siobhankelly@g.harvard.edu

⁶⁴ Susan Stryker, "Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism," *Parallax* 14, no. 1 (2008): 36–47, quotation on 40.

Copyright of Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion (Indiana University Press) is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.