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Towards a Trans Feminist Disability Studies

Niamh Timmons

Oregon State University, timmonsn@oregonstate.edu

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Towards a Trans Feminist Disability Studies

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the editors for their help, Orion Benedict for their support, and Qwo-Li Driskill whose guidance has greatly shaped this project. I'm also indebted to the activism of Black Trans Women, such as Tourmaline, who've been doing amazing work revitalizing these histories.

Towards a Trans Feminist Disability Studies

Niamh Timmons

Abstract: In this article, I investigate the ways in which Transfeminism and Trans Women can be more integrated and entangled within feminist disability studies and Disability Justice, and vice versa. This would make the field a seemingly rich arena for considering the linkages between Trans Women, Transfeminism, dis/ability, and feminism. Yet, the primary texts of the feminist disability studies consistently leave out Trans Women in their analyses. Specific inclusion and highlighting the experiences of Trans Women, especially Trans Women who are disabled, is often missing from disability rights and disability justice projects. This is especially alarming given the way Trans folks, particularly Trans Women, have been medically and socially constructed as “disabled” or existing in proximity to disability. Instead of nitpicking the gaps in which Trans Women and Transfeminism have been excluded from conversations about disability, I want to turn towards how Transfeminism and the histories of ableism towards disabled peoples and Trans Women can be entangled with one another. I divide the article into three main sections: Disability Studies and Activism and Trans Women, the Monster and the Freak, and Potential Entanglements. The first section addresses what engagements Trans Studies and Disability Studies have had with one another, as well as how that has played out in terms of Trans Activism and Disability Rights and Disability Justice. The second section looks at the histories and discourses in the ways in which Trans and disabled peoples have been constructed as the “monster” and the “freak” via freak shows of the nineteenth century, media reporting, and TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) rhetoric. The third section builds on the entanglements suggested previously and reads the activism of STAR, Marsha P Johnson, and Sylvia Rivera in a genealogy of Disability Justice principles, via the work of Sin’s Invalid.

Keywords: Trans Feminism, Monstrous, Feminist Disability Studies

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Content Notification: mentions of transmisogyny, anti-blackness, and ableism

In 2019, Black trans activist and filmmaker, Tourmaline, released her film *Salacia* which depicts the vibrant culture of the now lost Seneca Village, a thriving Black community in early nineteenth century New York City. An actor playing Mary Jones, a Black trans sex worker, appears prominently throughout the film.¹ Her work, on Seneca Village and Mary Jones, breathes life into historical Black Trans Women’s² lives; it weaves across historical time to showcase the historical persecution and also the joy in Black trans life (Wally 2020). Tourmaline’s projects are heavily influential to this article and how I think of the importance and tensions of Black trans life. I am also interested in how these figures, who are cast as deviant by those outside their communities, are linked to disability studies. Yet, when I turn to disability studies, particularly feminist disability studies, I see a disinterest or avoidance in thinking about the issues of Trans Women. This article is an intervention that calls feminist disability studies to not only pay attention to Trans Women but also highlight how the kinds of historical figures that Tourmaline celebrates should be read as an important part of disability genealogies. Figures like Mary Jones matter not only to Black and trans communities but to disabled communities as well.

In her thinking of a potential “critical disability studies methodology,” Julie Avril Minich (2017) moves toward recentering the field and practice of disability studies to its social justice aims. Minich argues that disability studies must move beyond merely investigating accessibility and “normativity:”

And I must emphasize that this scrutiny of normative ideologies should not occur for its own sake but with the goal of producing knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatized bodies and minds. In other words, I argue for naming disability studies as a methodology rather than a subject in order to recommit the field to its origins in social justice work. (6)

In this article, I argue for the project of a critical disability studies methodology by looking at how the principles of Transfeminism can be connected, or as I assert here, already have unexamined connections, with feminist disability studies, Disability Justice, and disability studies at large. Emi Koyama (2003) in her “Transfeminist Manifesto” argues that, “Transfeminism is primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (245).³ Here I take up Minich’s approach of disability studies as a methodology and also the framework of Koyama’s Transfeminism by deliberately centering Trans Women⁴ in order to understand how Trans Women, who are often left out of disability analysis, fit into the project of disability studies and Disability Justice. This is especially important given the project of feminist disability studies and the dynamics of transmisogyny. Julia Serano (2007) writes,

[b]ecause anti-trans discrimination is steeped in traditional sexism, it is not simply enough for trans activists to challenge binary gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism)—we must also challenge the idea that femininity is inferior to masculinity and femaleness is inferior to maleness. In other words, by necessity, trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement. (16)

As such, my project works to trans-form feminist disability studies and further argue that Trans Women’s oppression and activism are integral to feminist disability studies. By doing so, the subfield will benefit from engaging the intrinsic patriarchal structures, racisms, and ableism that are all at play in transmisogyny.⁵ I argue for studying the lives and the works of Trans Women and how they connect to the feminist disability studies project, and not duplicating their existence in a way that is used to “gender trouble” (Mog 2008). This is a preventive measure to address critiques made by trans scholars regarding the ways in which Queer Studies has largely only engaged trans people and issues as a means of troubling gender and sexuality rather than categories of analysis that deserve study (Stryker 2004, 241).

Additionally, in this article I critically address how Black Trans Women are most impacted by transmisogyny and ableism. To do so, I not only use Minich’s critical disability studies methodology but also a Disability Justice framework. In the primer of the Disability Justice and arts organization, Sins Invalid, Disability Justice activist Stacey Milbern (2016) writes:

A Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. We know that we are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them. We understand that all bodies are caught in these bindings of ability, race, gender, sexuality, class, nation state and imperialism, and that we cannot separate them. (14)

This is especially relevant given the emphasis on white Trans Women’s experiences and lives by Cishetero⁶ society, and also by often queer and Trans communities, given their social affinity to dominant structures.

Emily Skidmore (2011) notes that the “good transsexual,” as defined by figures such as Christine Jorgensen, is “able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality” (271). This continues to this day with white Trans Femininity, and the pursuit of being akin to Cisgender Women, as the center of Cishetero narratives. This narrative is often reproduced in trans communities. Thinking with Skidmore, this article highlights the disabling conditions of entwined racism, ableism, and transphobia, and how they disproportionately impact Trans Women of Color.

This project weaves critiques of transfeminism and trans studies as produced by Black trans scholars. Elías Krell (2017, 237) argues, via the work of the activist Tourmaline, for a reframing of transfeminism away from academic scholarship and into trans activism and histories. I follow the arguments of Krell and Tourmaline and locate the genealogies of a disability Transfeminist project in the lives of Black Trans Women. This serves as a methodological reminder and approach for potential future activist and scholarship in feminist disability studies to not only focus on activist histories but also locate them as central in the genealogical work pursued in disability and trans studies. Black disability studies scholars Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley (2019) provide a template in which the critical work of Black studies can be done within feminist disability studies, describing how to engage Black disabled histories:

This is not a project of posthumously assigning people a label that they wouldn't have chosen for themselves but looking critically at the context of a life and thinking through disability as an equally powerful force in shaping a person. By reassessing our heroes of the past with the lens of disability, we can provide more texture and more humanity to our portrayal of our ancestors. (34)

I utilize Bailey and Mobley's suggestion for a project of understanding historical figures in a genealogy of disability without categorizing them as disabled. I am extending this project to the genealogy of Black Trans Women as a central part of both Transfeminism and feminist disability studies.

Instead of suggesting new forms of theory or praxis to bridge feminist disability studies, Disability Justice, and Transfeminism with one another, I turn to the already existent traces that point us to the kinship and methodological usage of these practices and ways of thinking. I do this by focusing on the lives, experiences, and activism of Black and Trans Women of Color, specifically Mary Jones, Frances Thompson, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. This project is concerned both with how to chart the ways that genealogies of “the monster” and “the freak” reveal the similarities in reactions to disabled and Trans Women, and with the activism of Trans Women of Color as part of a disability genealogy.

Trans Studies/Disability Studies and the Absence of Trans Women

While this project is not about dwelling on the lack of scholarship including Trans Women in feminist disability studies, I think it is essential to chart the relationship between Trans Women and trans studies with disability studies. To do so, I look at the way “feminist disability studies” has been framed as a subfield and how Trans Women and trans studies could benefit that project. I also look more broadly about how the fields of trans studies and disability studies have been engaging one another. I make the case that disability studies scholars have refused to address transness—trans people also have an ongoing legacy of rejecting potential associations with disability. Chris Bell (2006) in his critique on the whiteness of disability studies,

writes, “I want to stress that Disability Studies is not the only field of inquiry wherein individuals of color are treated as second-class citizens. If anything, Disability Studies is merely aping the ideology of the vast majority of academic disciplines and ways of thinking that preceded it and which it now sits alongside of” (281).⁷ The result of this has led to the discomfort and inhospitality of disability studies and movements as an intellectual and activist space for People of Color. As such, trans and disability scholars and activists need to similarly examine this tension with whiteness, an issue that also exists within trans studies. Both the trans and disabled subject is presumed as white and this tendency needs to be challenged and grappled with.

As it currently stands, the subfield of “feminist disability studies” has been unable to factor in Trans Women into their discussions.⁸ In the introduction to *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Hall (2011) writes, “Feminist Disability Studies makes the body, bodily variety, and normalization central to analyses of all forms of oppression” (6). Elsewhere Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005) writes in her review of the burgeoning subfield, “Feminist Disability Studies questions the dominant premises that cast disability as a bodily problem to be addressed by normalization procedures rather than as a socially constructed identity and a representational system similar to gender” (1559). Based on these descriptions of feminist disability studies, the subfield should be a vibrant arena in which transness as a category would help reveal the ways gender, race, and class are entangled in the process of normalization. Failing to engage Trans Women as part of this analysis is a significant gap in the methodology that Garland-Thomson is highlighting. Her analysis also suggests, by exclusion, the categories of possible gender representation systems, revealing cisnormative underpinnings. The most visible connection between transness and disability is the way that trans people have been deemed disabled by medical institutions. Often, trans people who wish to undergo some medical transition must be diagnosed with gender dysphoria in order to access hormones or gender-affirming surgeries. Dean Spade (2003) makes the point about the performance of gender that trans people must undergo to receive trans-specific healthcare, “[t]he medical approach to our gender identities forces us to rigidly conform ourselves to medical providers’ opinion about what ‘real masculinity’ and ‘real femininity’ mean, and to produce narratives of struggle around those identities that mirror diagnostic criteria of GID [gender identity disorder]” (29).⁹ Over the last decades, insurance companies were resistant to cover trans-related healthcare as they deemed it merely cosmetic (Stryker 2017, 139). In the 2010 *O’Donnabhain v. Commissioner* case, which argued that GID provides a rationale for covering sex assignment surgery and hormone replacement therapy, O’Donnabhain noted, “I have to accept the stigma of being labeled as having a disorder [or] a mental condition . . . in order to get benefits. I haven’t liked this diagnosis from the very beginning. But I’ve got to play the game” (quoted in Strassburger 2012, 345-46). Susan Stryker (2017) writes on the complicated relationship trans people have with medical institutions:

But medical science has always been a two-edged sword—its representatives’ willingness has gone hand in hand with their powers to define and judge. Far too often, access to medical services for transgender people has gone through has depended on constructing transgender phenomena as symptoms of a medical illness or a physical malady, partly because “sickness” is the condition that typically legitimizes medical intervention. (52)

All of this points to the tense relationship that trans people have with medical institutions. This also produces a distance in which many trans people want to divorce themselves not only from medicalization and pathologization but also disability broadly. Eli Clare (2013) points this out, “I often hear trans people—most frequently folks who are using, or want to use medical technology to reshape their bodies—name their trans-ness a disability a birth defect” (262). What is revealed is a tension between being trans and being labeled disabled. Disability is both potentially a means to be cured and also something to be avoided. As

such, this notion of “defectiveness” permeates trans discourses, often overlapping with medical discourses about transness. As a Trans Woman who is disabled, I have often thought about the ways in which trans as an identity category does and does not relate to disability. I have noticed this ableism in trans communities firsthand and the inability of much of trans discourse to account for this relationship and the possibility of being trans and disabled.

To this end, Alexandre Baril and Catriona Leblanc (2015) make a vital critique, “1) trans studies assumes an able-bodied trans identity; and 2) disability studies assumes cis* disabled identity (that is, without ‘voluntary’ transition)” (31).¹⁰ This division often makes it difficult to not only have experiences of being a trans disabled person recognized, but also inhibits the potential to build coalitions and alliances between trans and disabled activists. As Jasbir Puar (2017) argues, “[h]istorically and contemporaneously, the nexus of disability and trans has been fraught, especially for trans bodies that may resist alliances with people with disabilities in no small part because of long struggles against stigmatization and pathologization that may be reinvoked through such an affiliation” (35). Thus, there is a definite space of tension where trans people are uncomfortable and resist associations with disability. As Puar notes, this often comes at the expense of working in solidarity with disabled people and their own frustrating experiences with the medical establishment. It should also be noted that many scholars (; and Baril 2015; Clare 2013; Puar 2014 and 2017) understand disability and transness as identity categories with no overlap, and often they ignore the existence of disabled trans people. In actuality, the two disciplines share a lot in common as Ashley Mog and Amanda Lock Swarr (2008) point out, “Transgender studies, much like disability studies, works with the lived bodily experience of people who fit outside of hegemonic gender norms and the ways in which people negotiate corporeal experiences that run up against societal barriers that only privilege certain bodies.” (9) Alison Kafer in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013, 157) suggests that there’s a coalitional possibility between the struggles between disabled and trans activism. However, I believe that it should not just be thought of as a coalition, rather there needs to be an examination of how disability and transness are deeply entangled. I push for not only the examination of the nexus that Puar describes, but also for acknowledgement of the contemporary and historical entanglements between disability and transness.

In this space, I have tried to chart the ways that disability and trans studies have often failed to understand one another and the critical relevance shared between the two. Given these critiques, there needs to be space where both trans and disability scholars and activists are more accountable to one another. Puar (2014) importantly asks us,

[w]hat kinds of political and scholarly alliances might potentiate when each acknowledges and inhabits the more generalized conditions of the other, creating genealogies that read both entities as implicated within same assemblages of power rather than as intersecting at specific overlaps? (78)

As such, I do not want to dwell in the world of criticizing these ideas in relation to one another. Instead, I am interested in a project that begins a more conversational approach to Transfeminism and Disability Justice praxes that already exist. Through this, we can view transness and disability as relational and can urge the activism and scholarship of both to become invested in one another.

The Monster and the Freak

One of the first steps necessary for this project is to think about the ways in which both disabled people and Trans Women are constructed as monstrous. Monstrosity has its roots in discourses that construct non-

normative bodyminds, such as disabled and Trans Feminine peoples, as monstrous. Asa Simon Mittman (2012) argues,

[a]bove all, the monstrous is that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us . . . to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization. (8)

For Margrit Shildrick (2011, 20), the monstrous is what nature can “disturbingly” make while producing an Other to make sense of the Self, it is the construction of an “unnatural” monstrous subject that constitutes the construction of what and who *is* normal. In other words, the monstrous is constituted in deviance, away from perceived notions of normalcy. Moreover, leaning into Mittman’s description of the monstrous, the deviance of the monstrous subject then produces confusion and tension for the self. It is very much a self-perpetuating cycle of who gets to be counted as “normal” and as an idealized subject. Thus, the process of who is determined as monstrous is not a static category and is ever-shifting. Interestingly, Shildrick in her listing of figures casts “encephalitic infants” and “conjoined twins” with the replicants and man-made androids from *Blade Runner* in the same category of the monstrous, which makes the “disturbing” and “naturalness” harder to pin down (20). However, it is useful when understanding how Trans Women are constructed as monstrous.

Exclusion from the norm is also what motivates ideas of trans people, specifically Trans Women, as deviant and perverse. Trans studies scholar C. Riley Snorton (2017, 20) addresses the ways in which medically examined bodies of enslaved people and policing of Blackness in the nineteenth century are intrinsically linked. At the same time, as many disability scholars have noted, disability cannot be divorced from the idea of the monstrous, resonating with medicalization of enslaved people’s bodies. In writing about the freak shows of the nineteenth century, Garland-Thomson (1996) notes:

Although extraordinary bodily forms have always been acknowledged as atypical, the cultural resonances accorded them arise from the historical and intellectual moments in which these bodies are embedded. Because such bodies are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment. Like the bodies of females and slaves, the monstrous body exists in societies to be exploited for someone else’s purposes. Thus, singular bodies become politicized when culture maps its concerns upon them as meditations on individual as well as national values, identity, and direction. (2)

In disability studies, the disabled body becomes a space, and in the case of the freak — the public display of disabled people for amusement — that makes able-bodied/minded societies feel secure in themselves. Using this foundation of the intrinsic connections with disability and the construction of the monstrous, I want to turn to the ways that Trans Women have been constructed as monstrous. Anson Koch-Rein (2014) points out that, “[t]he monster . . . is a central figure in representations of trans*, serving widely divergent narratives of transphobic insult and trans* resistance alike” (135). In other words, the monster is central to understanding transness as a group of oppressed identities and, as I explore in this article, is also how that moniker could be reclaimed.

There are two forms of the “monstrous” that I want to engage in with regard to Trans Women. First, the historical roots of the construction of Trans Women in the nineteenth century as monstrous, and second how we might read narratives of “monstrosity” in experiences of Trans Women of Color today.¹¹ In 1836,

Mary Jones, a Black Trans Woman sex worker, was arrested and put on trial for stealing money from a client. Jones was sensationalized in a lithograph that depicted her well-dressed with the caption “the Man-Monster.” Unlike disability that was on display at freak shows at the time, the monstrousness assigned to Jones was far more ambiguous. Tavia Nyong’o (2009) argues, “Sewally’s [sic] monstrousness lay both in his [sic] evident race and in the shocking conflation of the gender binary around which the dynamics of middle-class propriety pivoted” (98). Additionally, her monstrosity to white middle-class society could be located in the fact that Jones had sexual relations with white men, thus upsetting gender, racial, and sexual norms of the time. The category of the “monster” produces an Other in order to make sense of the Self. There is no evidence that Jones was considered a “monster” within the Black community, in fact, Jones argued that she was accepted within Black communities. On the other hand, her story is often erased within Black historical narratives. Nyong’o (2009) writes:

That Sewally’s [sic] story should be seen as too sensational for black history is doubly ironic given in that the sole record we have of his [sic] own words testifies to his [sic] own convictions that he [sic] was accepted in the black community of his day. Sewally [sic] told the police at the time of his [sic] first arrest that his [sic] cross-dressing persona had been accepted at balls thrown by African Americans in both New York City, where he [sic] was born and raised, and New Orleans, which he [sic] had visited. His [sic] public claims must be read carefully in their context of interrogation and ridicule, in which acceptance by his [sic] own people was perhaps the one refuge from scorn he [sic] could easily claim without fear of contradiction. (100)

The case of Mary Jones’ life reveals the monster is a subjective category. It also reveals the ambiguous and multiplicities of the construction of Black Trans Women as monstrous. Several decades later, this ambiguity would begin to dissipate.

Almost thirty years later, Frances Thompson, a disabled Black Trans Woman, was arrested for cross-dressing in Memphis. Following the Memphis Riots of 1866, where Thompson was raped, she testified before a Congressional committee about her experience and the Riots. Her testimony, along with four other Black women, pointed to the racialized and gendered violence that had happened in Memphis. Her arrest for cross-dressing in 1876 was used by white conservatives to undermine her testimony because of her transgender status. Hannah Rosen (1999) writes that:

Similar to the disparagement of black women prior to the riot, newspaper editors described Thompson as ‘lewd,’ associated her with prostitution, and portrayed her as the epitome of ‘unvirtuous’ gender and sexuality. They attributed to her ‘vile habits and corruptions,’ decried her ‘utter depravity,’ and accused her of using her ‘guise’ as a woman to facilitate her supposed role as ‘wholesale debaucher’ and ‘procuress’ of numberless young women for prostitution. The papers then used these charges to condemn their Republican opponents, reminding their readers that the Republican Party—now referred to as ‘the Frances Thompson Radical Party’—had relied upon Thompson’s ‘perjurious evidence’ to condemn white men in Memphis for violence and brutality. (284)

An article that appeared in the *Pulaski Citizen* in 1876 (Pulaski is a small town in south-central Tennessee where the Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1865) serves as an example of the vitriol directed at Thompson:

Thompson is well known to the people of this city as a low minded criminal of the most revolting character . . . Not being to pay the fine a lot of male toggery was put upon the impecunious Thompson, and he [sic] was sent out on the chain gangs to work the streets. An immense crowd of curious idling people about to see the changed

figure of the thick lipped, foul mouthed scamp, and finding it impossible to drive them off, Thompson was sent to the lock up again. (1)

For white conservatives and racists, Thompson's monstrousness was intrinsically tied not only to her race and gender identity but also her testimony about the violence she experienced. It is critical to understand that Thompson's gender identity, which was also deeply connected to her as a Black woman, was used to justify racial and gendered violence against all Black people. Similar to Mary Jones, Thompson argued that she was seen as a woman within the Black community, thus, nullifying the conditions of her arrest as cross-dressing. Rosen (2009) points out:

After her arrest, Thompson protested the findings that she was 'a man and not a woman in any respect.' She turned not to her body but, rather, to social practices and community recognition as evidence of her legitimate gender identity. A reporter from the *Memphis Daily Times* claimed that in an interview, Thompson insisted her arrest and imprisonment were unjust because she 'was always regarded as a woman,' having worn female attire since she was a small child. (238)

However, this was wholly disregarded.

Several threads emerge from the lives of Mary Jones and Frances Thompson. First, while cross-dressing laws were enforced against a number of gender non-conforming groups, the spectacles of the arrests and incarcerations of Jones and Thompson reveal that the alignment of Trans Women with the monster was deeply connected to anti-blackness. Second, the arrests of Jones and Thompson were used as a means to bolster anti-Black structures. The publicity of Jones' arrest connected Blackness with gender, racial, and sexual deviance, while the aftermath of Thompson's arrest provided the impetus to dismiss, and thus justify, racialized gendered violence against Black women. In other words, the arrests of Jones and Thompson have implications that impacted Black communities at large. At the same time, these cases also reveal brief moments of Black trans life in the Nineteenth Century. Based on the accounts made by Jones and Thompson, Black Trans Women were accepted in their Black communities. This hints towards the possibility that there was a vibrant existence of Black Trans Women in the nineteenth century that only became visible through the arrests and constructions of Jones and Thompson as monstrous. Lastly, as Nyong'o pointed out via the omission of Jones from Black historical narratives, we can think of Puar's call to reimagine our genealogies and see Jones and Thompson as part of a disability genealogy because Black Trans Women experienced the disabling effects of the law (after all, if Thompson could have paid her fine, she would not have been incarcerated). Additionally, Thompson was recognized in her life as disabled. The *Pulaski Citizen* (1876) article that spewed vitriol towards Thompson noted, "A quartette of medical experts who worked upon the case also discovered that the dusky Thompson's lower legs were as crooked as a young dogwood tree or a ram's horns." (1) Such mentions, while ableist, give us space to imagine disabled kinship and genealogies.

The second thread of Trans Women constructed as monstrous has stemmed from the ideologies of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERF), who argue that sex and gender are indistinguishable categories. These ideas have in turn permeated mainstream transmisogynist rhetoric. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly (1990) explicitly connects Trans Women to Frankenstein's monster, "Today the Frankenstein phenomenon is omnipresent . . . in . . . phallographic technology . . . Transsexualism is an example of male surgical siring which invades the female world with substitutes" (70-71). Daly sees vaginoplasty, the surgery to create non-intersexed Trans Women vaginas, as the means by which Trans Women become monstrous. Specifically, Daly sees Trans Women as being Frankenstein-esque in the ways that they become "female

substitutes.” At the core of her argument, Daly cannot see Trans Women, regardless if they have had a vaginoplasty or not, as women. Instead, it is this pursuit of womanhood that makes trans Women monstrous. Janice Raymond (1994) extends this blatant transmisogyny by considering the very presence of Trans Women in lesbian/women’s spaces as violent and monstrous. She writes, “The transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist, having castrated himself [sic], turns his [sic] whole body and behavior into a phallus that can rape in many ways, all the time. In this sense, he [sic] performs total rape, while also functioning totally against women’s will to lesbian-feminism” (112).¹² Raymond avoids using Daly’s gothic horror image of the monster and instead configures Trans Women’s very existence into a monstrosity.

The legacies of Daly and Raymond’s construction of Trans Women as monstrous have not disappeared from the transmisogynist imagination. In the 2015 campaign against Houston’s Equal Rights Ordinance, opponents of the ordinance reframed the measure by stoking fear that Trans Women were “really men” who were going to sexually assault women while in the women’s bathroom. A *New York Times* article describes the opposition to the ordinance as a “public safety” issue rather than a civil rights matter (Fernandez and Blinder 2015). This rhetoric was successful in swaying voters to reject the ordinance, even by voters in communities that the ordinance would benefit. At the root is a deep investment in transmisogynist rhetoric that echoes Raymond’s belief that Trans Women are really men whose gender presentation was used to assault “real” women sexually.

Marquis Bey (2017) argues that Blackness and transness are category nodes that operate in relation with one another:

They are, rather, nodes of one another, inflections that, though originary and names for the nothingness upon which distinction rests, flash in different hues because of subjects’ interpretive historical entrenchment . . . Manifesting in the modern world differently as race and gender fugitivity, black and trans*, though pointed at by bodies that identify as black and/or trans*, precede and provide the foundation condition for those fugitive identificatory demarcations. (278)

While Bey acknowledges their separate categorizations, his framing of Blackness and Transness requires us to think about their relationality to one another. As such, the work of TERF scholars and the Houston ordinance must be read in relation to one another. After all, the rhetoric opposing the Houston ordinance comes from a genealogy of white racial fear of Black men preying upon white women (Bederman 1995, 47). It is important to think, in these shifting genealogies, about the racial absences of Blackness. For TERF scholars and their transmisogynist rhetorics, anti-Blackness lingers beneath an uninvoked surface. Additionally, these structures, and the genealogies I have employed here, push us to think about how disability is entangled with these logics and constructions.

In these episodes of casting Trans Women as monstrous, it is important to return to the ways that cross-dressing laws, the arrests of Mary Jones and Frances Thompson, and TERF rhetoric all deem Trans Women as “unnatural,” as a force intrinsically violent to the social order, and with the potential to sexually violate “real women.” As such, the construction of Trans Women as monstrous is inherently disabling as it has literal consequences for Trans Women to have social, political, and even physical life. It is also important to consider that all of these constructions of Trans Women as monstrous are deeply racialized. While the connections are more explicitly present in the episodes of Jones and Thompson, it is less so in TERF and anti-trans bathroom bill rhetoric. However, the latter is deeply rooted in maintaining the virtue of white women that developed in the South following the Civil War (Bederman 1995, 45). Moreover, similar to the ways in which Thompson’s arrest was used to justify violence against Black women, so was the emphasis on Trans Women in bathrooms in the Houston ordinance campaign used a cover to justify legal discrimination against all non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-able-bodied, and non-gender conforming

peoples. In this section, I have used the case of the monster to think about how the roots of oppression can potentially be mapped into a genealogy between trans and disabled people. In the next section, I move beyond oppression experienced to see how potentials can be built.

Potentials of Trans-Disability Activist Genealogies

A part of the possibility of thinking about the potential overlap between Transfeminism and feminist disability studies is looking not just at the contemporary ideological similarities, but the genealogies of Trans Women of Color activism. Further, the roots of this activism, in particular, that of Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR), can be read in a way that establishes itself in relation to the genealogy of disability activism and scholarship. In this section, I lean heavily on Stacey Milbern's (*Sins Invalid* 2016) approach to Disability Justice, which she describes as:

Disability Justice holds a vision born out of collective struggle, drawing upon the legacies of cultural and spiritual resistance within a thousand underground paths, igniting small persistent fires of rebellion in everyday life. Disabled people of the global majority — black and brown people — share common ground confronting and subverting colonial powers in our struggle for life and justice. There has always been resistance to all forms of oppression, as we know through our bones that there have simultaneously been disabled people visioning a world where we flourish, that values and celebrates us in all our myriad beauty. (15)

Via this approach, I argue that we can conceptualize the activism of STAR as an important part of a resistance that is at its core a part of disability resilience and resistance. By emphasizing STAR in particular, I am suggesting that Trans Women's activism, especially that of Trans Women of Color, has always been connected to disability resistance and should be read in a genealogy as such. By making this reading, I suggest that solidarities do not need to be reinvented, or thought of as something new. Rather, the tools already exist and the methodological question is more about how we should use what has been provided by the activists that preceded us.

A critical connection that is possible between disability and Trans Women is to restructure our genealogies, a project that is already beginning in disability studies. The most notable of these recent restructurings of disability genealogies is the positioning of Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde as disability ancestors. Both Kim (2017) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2012) have noted that Audre Lorde and June Jordan have had their disabilities and work engaging their "disabilities" by the educational institutions they were employed at, as well as their work being often overlooked by disability scholars as relevant to the field of disability studies. Gumbs describes Lorde's importance, "The shape of Audre Lorde's impact includes her achievements, her words, her losses and everything she went through that we should not repeat as if we did not know." (17) In a similar vein, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) describes her connection to Anzaldúa in a letter addressed to her,

Gloria, we meet in bed. You never said you were disabled, that I can find — every inch of evidence you left resisted that label. But whatever you felt about that world, this is where you dreamed and lived too. This place of bodily difference, a tired body that comes in pain and suffering, that allows us to work part-time weird jobs, to rest, to fly. (182)

Both Gumbs and Piepzna-Samarasinha point towards their ancestral kinship with Lorde and Anzaldúa. Such restructurings of disability kinship tap into the project of critical disability studies methodology and “Crip of Color Critique.”

Kim (2017) describes a pointed practice of critical disability studies methodology (or potential methodologies), which she calls a “Crip of Color Critique,” that centers Women of Color and Queer of Color scholarship and activisms,

[a] crip-of-color critique thus aligns itself with the analysis of state violence central to the works of [Cathy] Cohen and other women-of-color/queer-of-color feminists, which — in distinction from nationalist, identitarian, or rights-based movements — refuse to frame the nation-state as a haven of protection. (5)

Kim’s imagining of a crip-of-color critique would then importantly see Lorde and Anzaldúa as ancestors in terms of their scholarship and activisms, even as they extend past the limits of what some might see as the limits of disability studies or rights movements. Returning to Minich’s (2017) notion of disability studies as a methodology, she emphasizes looking at “social justice roots” outside the disability rights movement,

[f]urthermore, when I locate the origins of the field in social justice work, I mean not only the widespread U.S. disability rights movement but also other movements for the liberation of people with bodies and minds that are devalued or pathologized but who do not consistently identify (or are not consistently identified) as disabled. (6)

I want to take up this project that Kim and Minich describe and think about how the activisms of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, as manifested via STAR, can be constituted as part of a disability genealogy in a similar vein to Lorde or Anzaldúa.

The present remembrance of Johnson and Rivera’s activisms often limits them to their involvement in the Stonewall Riots and ignores the organizing that Johnson, Rivera, and STAR were doing before and after the Riots. In the remainder of this article, I focus on the activist works of Johnson, Rivera, and STAR to highlight how we can situate them within in a genealogy of disability activism. STAR described part of their project as “[t]he end to all exploitive practices of doctors and psychiatrists who work in the field of transvestism” (Cohen 2008, 36). This accompanies the call for, “[t]he immediate end of all police harassment and arrest of transvestites and gay street people, and the release of transvestites and gay street people from all prisons and all other political prisoners” (36).¹³ Stephen Cohen (2008) notes:

Grounded in the rigors of street life, street transvestites developed a platform to address injustices — lethal prison conditions, police harassment, an inimical legal and mental health system, discrimination in housing and employment—and demand social revolution. STAR, along with GLF [Gay Liberation Front] and GAA [Gay Activist Alliance] organized pickets, visited prisons and mental institutions, publicized inmate mistreatment, and helped form the Gay Community Prison Committee. (92-93)

It is frustrating because many of the goals that STAR strove for are still largely out of reach for many Trans Women to this day. To address these issues, STAR built community space for street kids and the gay and trans community.

Beyond the rest of their activisms, STAR did two things to hold space for gay and trans community. First, along with the GLF (Gay Liberation Front), they helped found the collectively run Gay Community Center (GCC). The GCC was

[a] place to dance in. A place to hold classes on things we'll need to survive and grow: karate, theatre, crafts, discussion groups, history of gay oppression. We need to provide services for the gay community: legal, medical, housing, jobs, a gay switchboard. A free food program, day care for children. We need to have a space in which to start to understand the things that keep us apart: sexism, racism, loneliness, fear. We need to discover what we can become as fully actualized gay people. (Cohen 2008, 130)

STAR had representation in GCC's Collective, which allowed them some influence in the decision-making process, allowed to have a monthly benefit for STAR, yet their request to have their own room was denied (130). Second, STAR created a house, STAR House, for street kids to have a place to live. Cohen furthers that, "STAR House was significant as the first communal shelter on record that explicitly served street transvestites. It provided sustenance, emotional support, and a sense of spiritual harmony. Free gender expression was the norm" (131). Johnson, Rivera, and the other older leadership of STAR became maternal figures for many of the street kids they housed. They would work the street in order to pay for rent for the building. STAR House also served as the organizing center for all of STAR's activism. Rusty Moore, co-founder of Transy House, where Rivera lived during her final years, describes the importance of STAR House and the organization, "I think the historical significance of STAR is that it was probably the first political/social initiative of the trans community in New York City, and certainly the first focused on the problems of throw-away youth in our community" (131). Even though the organization collapsed in 1973 following the Christopher Street Liberation Day,¹⁴ they had intentions to expand the work of the organization. Johnson explained the future goals of STAR,

[w]e're going to be doing STAR dances, open a new STAR home, a STAR telephone, 24 hours a day, a STAR recreation . . . And plus we're going to have a bail fund for every transvestite that's arrested, to see if we can get a STAR lawyer to help transvestites in court. (Untorelli Press n.d., 29)

For Johnson, STAR was not only an organization to protest against the oppression experienced by transvestites but was also connected with the pride in being "gay" and trans. When asked about trans people in small cities and cities without STAR, Johnson responded:

Start a STAR of their own. I think if transvestites don't stand up for themselves, nobody else is going to stand up for transvestites. If a transvestite doesn't say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite, then nobody else is going to hop up there and say I'm gay and I'm proud and I'm a transvestite, because they're not transvestites. The life of a transvestite is very hard, especially when she goes out on the streets. (28)

It is key to understand that an underlying importance in the formation and activities of STAR was the need for trans people to look out for another because gay activists were unable to do so.

Returning to disability genealogies, the activism of STAR reflects several practices of Disability Justice activism. Disability Justice activist Patty Berne lists the "10 Principles for Disability Justice" as: intersectionality, the leadership of the most impacted, anti-capitalist politics, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation (Sins Invalid 2016, 16-19). Many of these same principles are evident in the activism of STAR. In their Mission they declared:

We want a revolutionary peoples' government, where transvestites, street people, women, homosexuals, puerto ricans, indians, and all oppressed people are free, and not fucked over by this government who treat us

like the scum of the earth and kills us off like flies, one by one, and throws us into jail to rot. This government who spends millions of dollars to go to the moon, and lets the poor Americans starve to death. (Cohen 2008, 37)

The world that STAR imagined was one where not only trans and “gay” people were free—but everyone. To do so, they sought activist alliances not only with the GLF and GAA, which began to disintegrate as the two organizations continually distanced themselves from trans people, but also other radical organizations of the time. STAR marched with Young Lords of New York to protest police violence and built connections with the Black Panther Party (Cohen 2008, 131). Additionally, it is vital to acknowledge STAR’s activism against psychiatric institutions and other disabling institutions and structures. It is also important to think of Johnson and Rivera as disabled figures, a detail that often gets lost.

STAR emerged out of sit-in protests in Weinstein Hall at New York University (NYU), which denied the use of the space to the gay community. Following their eviction from Weinstein, a protest in the Fall of 1970 against NYU mixed with the protest against Bellevue Psychiatric Prison. Not only did STAR, which had organized shortly after the Weinstein protests, demand that NYU provide,

- (1) Space for a 24-hour gay community center, to be controlled by the gay community;
- (2) Open enrollment and free tuition for gay people and all people from the communities NYU oppresses; [and]
- (3) All NYU students, employees, and faculty have the right to be openly gay, without fear of retaliation by NYU.

But they also demanded:

- (1) An end to oppression of homosexuals and all people in Bellevue Psychiatric Prison—the end of shock treatment, drugs, imprisonment, and mental poisoning; [and]
- (2) Free medical care, dental care, and preventive medicine under community control, including free abortions controlled by community women, with no forced abortion and no forced sterilization, without regard to age or obtaining permission from anybody. (Cohen 2008, 122)

STAR, in the same activist breath, were arguing for space for the gay and trans community, self-determination of their health, and against the institutional violence of medical institutions. It is critical to understand that STAR was fighting against the violence of mental institutions at the same time that disability activists were demanding for deinstitutionalization. While there is no historical record of collaboration between STAR and disability activists of the time, the two were making the same demands about the violence their communities were experiencing.

Writing in the aftermath of Marsha Johnson’s death, Rivera noted that,

Marsha had been on SSI (Social Security Disability) for quite some time because she had several nervous breakdowns. She had been locked up several times in Bellevue and Manhattan State . . . Marsha lived in her own realm, and she saw things through different eyes. She liked to stay in that world. (Untorelli Press n.d., 44)

Not only was STAR protesting against the violence of mental institutions at large, but they were also protesting against the violence Johnson, and several other STAR and community members experienced while in these institutions as people with psychiatric disabilities. They fought against institutional violence

based on what disability activists and scholars might consider their experiences as disabled people. This intersected with their gender and sexual identities, which was institutionally rendered as deviant, and in need of treatment. STAR's activism was very much rooted in speaking against the disabling violence they experienced and sought to make a better world for those that were marginalized from other activist campaigns.

In this approach to STAR, it is necessary to center the kinds of disabling violence they protested against but also the ways they strove to create a better world for their community. They wanted to build a world that was rid of oppression not just against trans people, but all oppressed people. If disability studies is moving towards a genealogy that sees figures like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Gloria Anzaldúa as disability ancestors, I argue that there is an imperative to include activists like Marsha Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and STAR. To do so would center the activist roots of a critical disability methodology, as Minich (2017) desires, and the breadth of potential trans and disability genealogies. By centering STAR and its activism, we practice the possibilities of new critical disability methodologies and genealogies. By centering STAR, I am suggesting that the core of a feminist disability studies and trans studies should be in the activism of Trans Women of Color, as they have already been doing the work that these fields pursue via their activism. This is especially crucial for the project of feminist disability studies which has thus far alienated itself from Trans Feminine people. Centering the histories and lives of Trans Women of Color is especially important in that anti-blackness and the ugliest forms of transmisogyny emerge here. The activism of STAR, along with the principles of Disability Justice, point us to activism available to us and future generations.

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Endnotes

1. Tourmaline is continuing her work on Mary Jones in her upcoming film, *Mary of Ill Fame*.
2. I capitalize "Trans Women," "Transfeminism," and "Trans Feminine" to mark their status as political and politically affecting identities and categories. Similarly, I capitalize Black throughout this article.
3. Koyama also points out that Transfeminism is open to "queers, intersex people, trans men, and non-transwomen" but that it must center Trans Women.
4. I use the label "Trans Women" to refer to Trans Women, Trans Femme, and Trans Feminine folks. This is an imperfect label and I want to recognize how I use the label as not perfectly encapsulate the gender identities of non-Trans Women Trans Feminine and Trans Femme folks.
5. In *As Black As Resistance* (2018), William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi describe patriarchy as pivoting around Transmisogyny at its core. I share their sentiment here.
6. "Cishetero" is shorthand for Cisgender-heterosexual. In other words, gender identities and sexualities deemed "normative" by society.

7. This is a process of scholars in academic disciplines claiming their works as “original works” works within settler colonial logics, which claims ideas and intellectual space as “new” or “empty” without acknowledging the work done, often by Black, Indigenous Peoples, and People of Color.

8. Several texts within the field which engage “feminist disability studies” do not engage Trans Women. Feminist disability studies’ texts such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s (2005) review of the sub-field, Kim Q. Hall’s (2011) anthology with the same title, and Stacy Clifford Simpican’s (2017) work on feminist disability studies methodology would all be richer and more nuanced if they addressed the role Trans Women potentially have in relation to the field.

9. Gender Identity Dysphoria was added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1980. In 2013, the diagnosis was replaced with Gender Dysphoria, which remains in the DSM manual.

10. I think that Baril and Leblanc’s claims are a bit of an exaggeration. There are scholars who engage both fields and discuss people who are both Trans and Disabled, most notably Eli Clare.

11. I am choosing to read these figures as Trans Women despite the conflicting historical records on how they gender-identified.

12. I believe disability studies scholars should look at Raymond and other “radical feminist” writings in order to unpack how they describe the “natural” gendered body/bodies.

13. At the time, “gay” was an umbrella term that often incorporated what we might recognize as a pluralities of genders and sexualities.

14. Rivera suggested the collapse of STAR in part on lesbian women and other gays who ostracized transvestites.

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