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1970s transvestite taxonomies and the new queer frontier

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Abstract

According to Kadji Amin, vernacular discourses in recent years have "exploded Butler's heterosexual matrix in a way hitherto unimaginable" (2023: 91–2). Yet neither queer nor transvernacular taxonomies are new, and the separation of sex, gender and sexuality has been a contested topic among trans subcultures since at least the 1950s. Combining original archival research with feminist, queer and trans philosophes of gender, this paper argues that, despite being almost entirely unhistoricized, the identity category of "transvestite" represented one of the most highly organized, internally differentiated, and intellectually significant identity formations of the 20th century. We can learn a lot about possible futures for queer studies by turning our attention to the recent past and the untheorized archive of 1970s trans community print culture is full of lists of the constantly evolving identity categories available for members of these early trans communities. From the 1960s onward, united through mailing lists and a burgeoning periodical culture, a complex ecosystem of transvestite subcultures emerged throughout the Anglosphere. Trans people used correspondence, newsletters and magazines, to connect across nations and continents. Through these formats, they discursively constructed how to understand transness, queering prevailing understandings of sex, gender and sexuality. Examining the impulses behind and effects of these complex categorical formations historicizes and enriches understandings of the ambivalence of trans taxonomies today.

Keywords

Print culture, transvestite, trans history, taxonomy, 1970s, trans feminine, trans women

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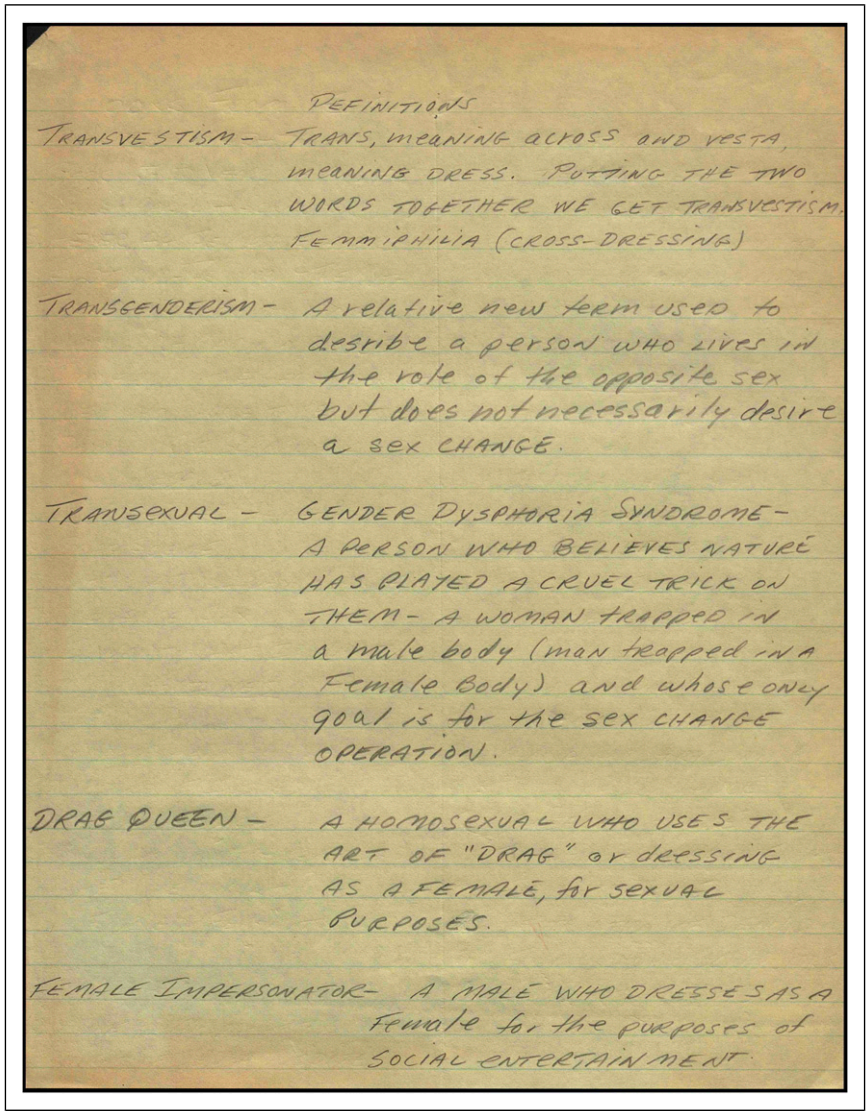
Introduction

Long before Judith Butler theorized the heterosexual matrix, or when queer taxonomies went 'mainstream' via their incorporation on Facebook drop-down menus and dating app profiles, trans people theorized, coined, and contested taxonomic terms within robust socio-intellectual communities. The above list (Figures 1 and 2), from the Francine Logandice collection at the GLBT Historical Society archives, in a folder titled: "Definitions, notes", (1981, n.d.) was likely written by Logandice herself in the 1970s. Before she got back into the bar business in 1977, running a string of bars in San Francisco which catered variously to trans sex workers, lesbians, gays and mixed clientele, Logandice, who transitioned in 1969, had been an influential researcher and lecturer on gender identity.[1] This list, which was used as notes for one of her talks, blends in-community categories (e.g., gender fuck and female impersonator) with sexological and clinical types (e.g. transsexual and hermaphroditism). As in the case of transgenderism, some are obvious contemporary antecedents. Other terms like hermaphrodite fell by the wayside often due to their medicalized, pathologized, and essentialist associations, or because they did not originate from trans community. From the vantage point of 2025, these reasons make sense to us. Yet there were many, *many,* other terms authored by community members which were simply not taken up by the broader community. In the mid-1960s, transvestite community pillar Virginia Prince coined the term 'femmiphile,' (lover of the feminine) which she preferred to the more clinical category of transvestite and which achieved a short lived uptake by a small number of mainly white, American, middle-class, and heteronormative transvestites in the 1960s and 70s. Though most returned to the familiar mid-20th century trans taxonomic binary of transvestite-transsexual, others understood themselves under different terms, or they coined their own. This article historicizes today's investment in proliferating signs as another iteration of a longstanding taxonomic impulse within trans subcultures. In doing so, we consider the desires that motivate the creation of new lists and subdivisions and highlight the ambivalent politics of the border; occasionally playful, oftentimes divisive, which accompanies the investment in new categories of naming.

This list (Figures 1 and 2), is just one of many examples of trans individuals coining and codifying, and sorting and systematizing, gender categories in the second half of the 20th century. Trans people undertook such exercises to narrativize their sense of self, or as memory-aids to keep up with the constant proliferation of new terms within a community. This 'straight transfeminine subcultural network' (Pihlak, 2023), was alternatively referred to by members as the TV-TS community, transie community, paraculture, or gender community. The bevy of newsletters, journals, and in-person events were key sites of inter-personal socializing, More important for some, these sites also facilitated intra-community identity formation and the documentation of one's own and one's preferred sexual type in classified sections. Subdivisions of umbrella terms were also, of course, useful for positioning oneself or one's group as not like *them*, with the racialized, poor, sex worker 'drag queens' and the closeted and sexually conservative 'heterosexual transvestites' often serving as convenient objects of disavowal by the other.



DEFINITIONS

TRANSVESTISM – TRANS, meaning across and VESTA, meaning DRESS. PUTTING THE TWO WORDS TOGETHER WE GET TRANSVESTISM. FEMMIPHILIA (CROSS-DRESSING)

TRANSGENDERISM – A relative new term used to describe a person who lives in the role of the opposite sex but does not necessarily desire a sex CHANGE.

TRANSEXUAL – GENDER DYSPHORIA SYNDROME – A PERSON WHO BELIEVES NATURE HAS PLAYED A CRUEL TRICK ON THEM – A WOMAN trapped in a male body (man trapped in a Female Body) and whose only goal is for the sex CHANGE OPERATION.

DRAG QUEEN – A HOMOSEXUAL WHO USES THE ART OF "DRAG" or dressing AS A FEMALE, for sexual PURPOSES.

FEMALE IMPERSONATOR – A MALE WHO DRESSES AS A Female for the purposes of SOCIAL ENTERTAINMENT.

Figure 1. Gender identity definitions, p. 1. Francine Logandice collection. GLBT historical society archives, San Francisco, California: carton 1, folder 12–14. Definitions, Notes. 1981; n.d. MS Francine Logandice Collection, 1923-1998 Carton 1 Folder 13. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/HJVJDN798960793/AHSI?u=glbths&sid=bookmark-AHSI&pg=36. Accessed 11 June 2025.

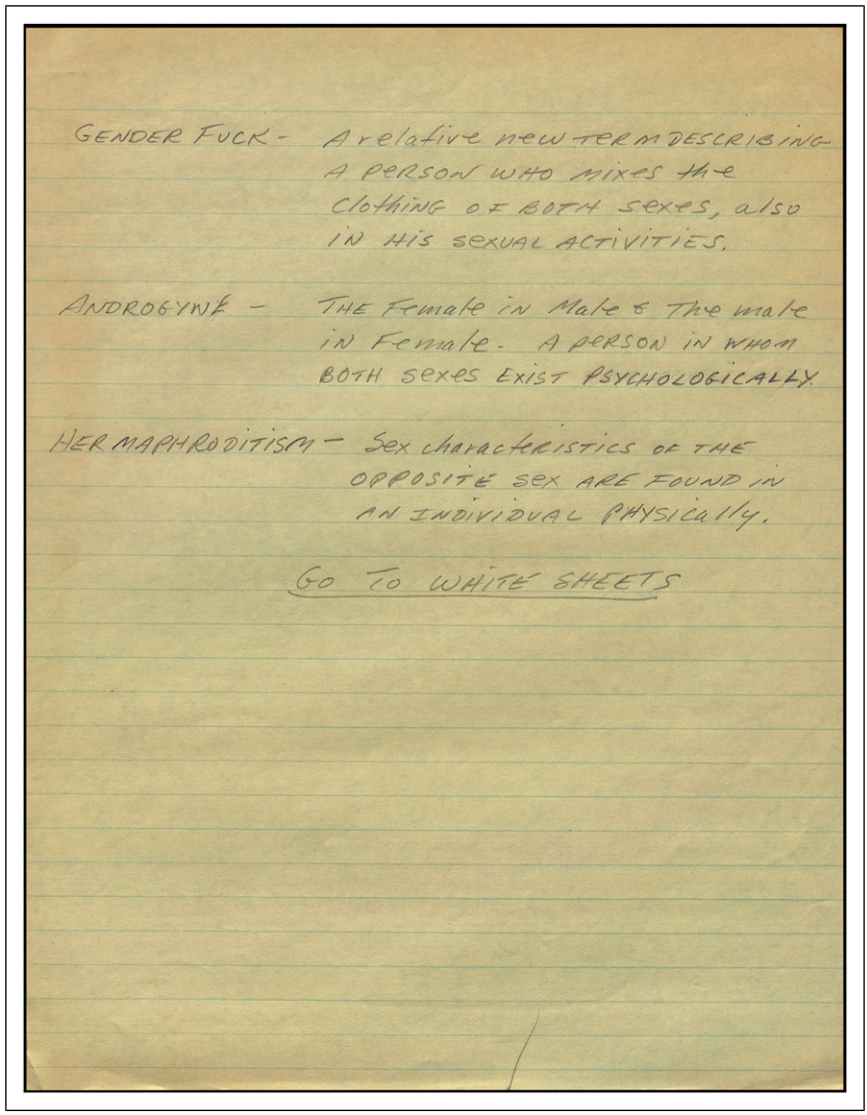


Figure 2. Gender identity definitions, p. 2. Francine Logandice collection. GLBT historical society archives, San Francisco, California: carton 1, folder 12–14. Definitions, Notes. 1981; n.d. MS Francine Logandice Collection, 1923-1998 Carton 1 Folder 13. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/HJVJDN798960793/AHSI?u=glbths&sid=bookmark-AHSI&pg=37. Accessed 11 June 2025.

The abundance of such catalogues prior to the advent of the 'trans Internet' and the socio-intellectual contexts in which people produced these identity formations, opens up a series of questions about the place of taxonomy in trans lifeworlds past, present, and future. What are the affective impulses that motivate the construction of constantly evolving identities? And why is what Freud ([1930] 2003) memorably called the narcissism of small differences, the hypersensitivity to intra-community differences that make those with more in common prone to conflict, so repeatedly part of trans world making? What is the relationship between the clinic and the community in the construction and negotiation of identity categories? And finally, what difference, if any, does attending to taxonomy make for our understanding of queer and trans futures?

We reframe what Kadji Amin has termed, somewhat critically, 'the taxonomical renaissance' (2023: 92), as the taxonomical *impulse*, and in doing so we propose that to historicize the existence of trans taxonomies, and to observe the impulse(s) which animate them, demonstrates the longstanding tussle between subjectivity and sign which shapes trans communities. For one to just scratch the surface of the vast archive of English language transvestite community print culture, reveals a gregarious network of members who shared, theorized, and tried out 'early' micro-identities, over 60 years before their supposed arrival. At times visionary, at times uncomfortably essentializing or exclusionary, exploring the self-naming, self-making and world-making that took place in transvestite subcultures, and on the pages of print, is not a utopian project of imagining otherwise and doesn't yield any romantic visions for community cohesion or consensus. More minimally, this article departs from the fact that these lives were 'lived, hence livable, and asks after the conditions of that possibility' (Scheman, 1997: 132). These questions are not simply of historical or epistemic significance. At a time when nation states are rapidly repealing trans self-identification, and non-trans media, publishers, religious, and other social institutions further attack the legitimacy of trans people's personhood, for contemporary trans communities to examine the forms of care, community formation and becoming that taxonomies have made possible is politically urgent.

1970s transvestite periodical organizing and world-building

In 1952, a small group of trans femmes in Long Beach released two mimeographed issues of a periodical titled *Transvestia* that they circulated amongst themselves and a small group of trusted confidants. Across both issues, they took pains to distinguish themselves, heterosexual transvestites, from both transsexual women and homosexuals. For the latter category they wrote that, 'Transvestism should not be confused or compared with sex deviates ...Transvestism is merely and simply an aesthetic expression and manifestation of artistic appreciation for true beauty and charm.' (Meyerowitz, 2002: 179–180). From one of the earliest known trans periodicals, trans femmes drew taxonomic lines of respectability.

It is only through the subsequent influence of two members of this small circle, Louise Lawrence and Virginia Prince, that we know of this home-made magazine. The definitive 'first' trans periodical network likely resembled this group: a small number of trans intimates who passed around home-made trans texts. Given that American trans

periodicals into the 1980s faced governmental obstruction which included the seizure and search of mail-order packages and private correspondence, any network of trans works passed between trans people would have needed to operate under intense secrecy. Though the exact number of trans authored trans periodicals will never be known, what is certain is that many such newsletters existed and they were subsequently lost to historical memory. Despite this archival opacity, from roughly 1960 until the mid-2000s, a visible, gregarious, and durable trans feminine periodical network proliferated across every continent save Antarctica. The pages of innumerable trans-authored trans-centered texts are filled with echoes, divergences, and resonances with our contemporary trans worlds. These pages facilitated the development of friendships, sexual relationships, healthcare knowledge sharing, bitchy squabbles and, of course: discourse.

In 1960, Virginia Prince used her personal resources to relaunch *Transvestia*, and within 3 years there emerged a nascent Anglophone Global North trans feminine periodical network of an unknown number of titles. From 1960 to roughly the mid-2000s, this robust and durable ecosystem of periodicals grew to include in-person community groups, a lively subcultural social calendar, and a litany of shops and service-providers which catered to it. From Lower Hutt in Aotearoa to Vancouver, the Western Cape of South Africa to Edinburgh in the UK, these modest publications connected trans feminine groups which were themselves latticed under the surface of trans misogynistic societies in the Global North. Members often physically came together at discrete, private locations where they could dress femininely, perhaps in front of people for the first time, be amongst those who understood them, and oftentimes access invaluable and largely inaccessible trans information, services, and goods.

Whilst only beginning to be historicized or theorized (Cousens, 2023; Hansen, 2023; Hill, 2013; Honkasalo, 2023; Pihlak, 2023)' indeed- archival collections are still in their infancy- these communities are typically dismissed on account of their 'heteronormativity' (Hill, 2007) and 'white liberal trans normativity' (Matte, 2014) - a desire for assimilation and faith in public education and 'helping professionals' (i.e. the medical establishment) as a means by which to achieve this. Prioritizing nuclear families, well-paid jobs and attending trans centric parties and socials on evenings and weekends, the transvestite textual cultures that are the focus of this article, are more readily, and often pejoratively, associated with 'lifestyle politics' than the 'radical politics' of 'Queen Mothers' who were organizing in public spaces, like Clarabelle in the 1920s and 1930s (Cowan, 2012; Feinberg, 2005) and Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Johnson in the 1960s and 1970s. Within their associated periodicals, members tried out or mused over old or emergent identity categories within the relative safety of their chosen reading setting. At the same time as the now celebrated the street queens of STAR and those involved in the Compton's Cafeteria Uprising confronted and resisted carceral and capitalist violence, periodical trans femme readers' engaged in their own 'acts, risks, and sharing' (Davis, 2015: 627) by reading articles on where one could buy and try on clothes in the right size, how to achieve a polished and passable feminine style, and how to avoid any hassle from the authorities altogether.

The readers, contributors, and members of these trans feminine periodical-based subcultures did not engage in direct revolutionary action, but this does not mean their

place in trans histories or knowledges should be dismissed. Indeed, the fact that seemingly the majority of 20th-century trans feminine subcultures and their constitutive members desired assimilation to a normative mainstream continues to be an under-written aspect of both trans scholarship and collective memory. The intellectual sidelining of more respectability minded trans ancestors reflects a continuation of the anti-normative impulse within trans scholarship (Chu and Harsin Drager, 2019) – an orientation underscored by a white gaze which naively situates trans of color existence as 'intrinsically antinormative' (Gill-Peterson, 2020: 130). It also highlights the desire for our historical trans antecedents to consist of mythologized anti-capitalist, queer, hardened revolutionary activists. Yet as Abram J. Lewis has highlighted, trans historiography is rarely so amenable to such triumphalist idealizations (2014: 14).

Rather than offer a singularly critical or celebratory engagement with these communities and their taxonomical practices, we focus instead on the affective dynamics at play and the material effects that various naming practices incurred. Drawing on the tradition of ideology critique, we are interested in what structures members were emotionally invested in, reproduced or resisted on the pages of print, and how the act of naming or taxonomic classification facilitated these impulses. These were heterogenous, international networks and whilst our combined research over the past few years means we have engaged hundreds of periodicals produced across North America, the British Isles, Oceania, and South Africa, this remains a small sample of the English language print infrastructure that blossomed from 1960 onwards. The trans periodical subcultural networks we consider here were overwhelmingly made by and for trans femmes, or at least that is what can be found in archives we consulted: the Louise Lawrence Transgender Archive, The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, the ArQuives, the GLBT Historical Society Archives, the Hall Carpenter Archives at the London School of Economics, the Peter Farrer Collection at Liverpool John Moores University Archives, and the Digital Transgender Archive. Though trans masculine correspondents were present in trans femme texts, specifically trans masculine networks only began to significantly stabilize in Canada and the US from roughly the mid-1980s. Our focus on the 1960s and 1970s is due to the significance of these decades as the watershed years for the 'transvestite' identity formation. Moreover, whilst petticoat punishment periodicals and related transvestite erotic literature also flourished in these decades, likely sharing many of the same readers (see Adair, 2023), it is the user-generated, community-oriented, textual spaces that the 'straight' network provided which is our focus. In the aftermath of Christine Jorgenson's well-publicized 'sex-change', and concurrent with the revolutionary social changes being envisioned by anti-Vietnam war protestors, Black liberation organizations, New Left movements, and the women's liberation movement, these years saw trans community formation begin at pace, and the possibility of new worlds to accommodate trans people was a genuinely held horizon.

Despite the opacities of the archive, prior to the establishment of trans technologies online (Dame Griff, 2023), and as new medical and social possibilities were transforming relationships to one's own body and to others, the discussions around identity and language are important to historicize, contextualize and theorize. They not only inform contemporary intellectual and devastatingly urgent political questions around the

relationship between signs, selves and structures (what does individual and community becoming look like when we under attack from the state?) but more profoundly and optimistically gesture towards the ultimately ungovernable location of trans subjectivity; in sites of possibility, potentiality and affectivity, rather than in fantasies of bounded self-sovereignty. Whilst not universalizable, what emerges in the periodicals under consideration, is the provocation that the impulse to taxonomize is not an impulse to codify, but to multiply; to get closer and closer to a category that fits and feels better, even if the horizon of best fit remains 'beyond the finish line of anticipated experience' (Aultman, 2019: 1).

Taxonomy and trans hirstory

According to Kadji Amin, we – those in Western queer and trans communities in the year 2023- are in the midst of a 'taxonomical renaissance' (2023: 92). In recent years, he argues, the new queer identity formations (such as gender fluid, nonbinary, agender) have exploded Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix (their pre equal marriage account of how intelligible personhood is bestowed by the alignment of a binary sex and gender, coupled with an erotic desire for the opposite (e.g., male and masculine desires female and feminine, and vice versa) 'in a way hitherto unimaginable'. 'Vernacular discourses' continues Amin, have subdivided the 'tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes' of gender and sexual orientation 'into a series of more precise distinctions' (2023: 91). Amin observes that 'if the heterosexual matrix was a tight and immobile structure, then the contemporary system to which I refer works more like a kaleidoscope, in which each axis of definition is mobile and may be combined with any other axis, making way for an almost infinite array of variations' (2023: 91). In other words, the co-constitutive alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality which provided the basis of Butler's theorization of heteronormative regulation (and heterosexual melancholia), has been fragmented by the 'new' identity formations which have ruptured the necessary alignments of sex, sexuality and gender (cf. Hord, 2020).

Before us trans studies scholars and/or members of the new queer genders ourselves jump to the conclusion that destabilization of heteronormative regulation might fortell a new queer frontier, Amin cautions that a genealogy of taxonomy reveals its imbrication in regimes of coloniality and sexology. From 19th-century white-supremacist race science, eugenics and phrenology, to Magnus Hirschfeld's rigid and ontologizing sexological distinctions, if one historicizes taxonomy, what emerges, Amin details, is a decidedly unqueer past. Therefore, for one or one's community to coin new identity formations provides onto-epistemic retrenchment of the very oppressive systems of racialized gender that queer identities are surely situated against. These are important observations, and ones which follow from decolonial feminist scholarship into the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2007) and the Eurocentricity of gendered formations and categorizations (Oyewumi, 1997). For us to historicize the long history of overwhelmingly white queer and trans in-community taxonomic theorization and classification necessitates an engagement with these imbricated histories of transness and white-supremacy. Aaron Stone clarifies that 'sexual and racial sciences have historically amplified cultural anxieties

about race and sex, yoked these anxieties together, criminalized Blackness as sexual nonnormativity, and forcibly ungendered Black flesh to facilitate white self-definition' (Stone, 2023: 28). This means the question of who's self-definition is made possible becomes central to a critical analysis of the investments in, and the trouble with, taxonomy. As a polemical reminder to avoid the privileging of the present, and to recognize the enmeshment of gender in systems of coloniality and science, Amin's argument contains important insights which animate our engagement with the archive.

Turning to the pages of print from the second half of the twentieth century, however, complicates the declaration of a taxonomic tipping point, and of the supposed newness of trans taxonomies. It also challenges the subjectivating power of the heterosexual matrix for trans and gender non-conforming lives prior to Butler's naming of the framework. Within the admittedly occluded archive of 20th-century trans periodicals, and the social spaces that accompanied them, trans femmes engaged in deeply embodied exchanges on what it felt like to be trans, how to refer to the community, which identities constituted it, and which *did not.* One can regularly find trans correspondents vigorously subdividing and border-policing the category of transvestite along sexuality, gender, political, and fetishistic lines which have no relationship to the heterosexual matrix. Heterosexual/full-time/partial/over/under transvestites, male lesbians, transgenderists, transgenderal men/women, part-time/full-time women, drags, drag queens, femmiphiles, transes, and male women, are just some of the subdivisions of transvestite identity that trans femmes theorized, tried out, and slung at others within the pages of community-based journals, with varying degrees of uptake, starting from 1960. Many of these subdivisions were based on elitist and exclusionary ideals of respectability to an umarked white middle-class referent and we do not seek to idealize such discourses. What is significant, however, is that these categories all named one's gender *and* sexuality, yet in ways that contravene the disarticulation of gender and sexuality expected by the heterosexual matrix. Exploring how sex and gender embodiments have been lived in recent history enables us to focus on what we read as the politically enduring question in Amin's argument. If trans taxonomies have been and continue to be world-making projects, *and* the epistemological premises of these projects include the naturalizing and normativizing power of naming, how can historicizing the contemporary impulse to categorize facilitate a simultaneously more reparative, yet critically engaged, reading of the 'categorical imperative' (Bey et al., 2023) among queer and trans people?

Consideration of the relationship between language, community formation, and identity is neither new nor peculiar to trans communities. Outside of science and biology, Western anthropologists including Levi-Strauss and Margaret Mead, concerned and fascinated with the 'queerness' of 'primitive' people, have taken as their point of departure the idea that language structures community, and insider/outsider status confirms identity and subjectivity. Historian of sexuality Jeffrey Weeks has discussed the 'new taxonomic and labelling zeal' (2017: 26) which gained momentum in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when sexuality became a distinguishing marker between individuals. Meanwhile, central to Foucault's account of disciplinary power, is the productive and subjectivizing dimensions of systems of classification. Building on his observation in *The Order of Things,* that 'a knowledge of empirical individuals can be acquired only from the

continuous, ordered, and universal tabulation of all possible differences' (1994: 144) Foucault's insight that subjectivity, sign and structure are thoroughly entangled remains, whilst less regularly reproduced than his now canonical interventions, one of the most incisive and wide-reaching aspects of his thought.

Within trans communities, however, the relationship between language, subjectivity, embodiment, and community is particularly resonant given that it is resistance to the coercive violence of naming (i.e., 'it's a girl!') that constitutes trans subjectivity. As Susan Stryker explains, 'phallogocentric language, not its particular speaker, is the scalpel that defines our flesh' (2006: 253) so then language also bears the surest potential to write the body otherwise. Indeed, such ideas have been the core of discussions on the importance of narrativity to trans becoming.[2] In the consideration of narrative and naming conventions that follow, we highlight that normativity is necessarily entangled in the mechanisms of naming, and therefore that anti-normativity in itself cannot be a decisive arbiter for the epistemic significance of our trans hirstorical objects where *hirstory* signifies: 'an alternative conception of history that emphasizes the experiences of gender non-conformity and people we may describe today as trans and nonbinary' (Raha, 2022: 5)

Categories, community, and the clinic

The transvestite macro-identities emerged within the 'taxonomic revolution' that occurred in the mid-twentieth century US.[3] Resisting the prevailing umbrellas of 'gay' or the more medicalized 'invert', as David Valentine (2007: 42–3) summarizes,

> By the mid-twentieth century, various kinds of self-named fairies, queens, butches, femmes, homosexuals, transvestites, and latterly, transexuals were coming to understand themselves through scientific and judicial categories but were also generating distinctions for and among themselves.

Valentine is correct to observe how scientific and judicial categories occupied sites for recognition, whilst also being re-defined and resisted within mid-twentieth century trans communities. However, there was also a highly co-operative relationship between many gender subcultures and sexologists, psychologists, and doctors at the time; particularly amongst white middle-class trans communities who maintained a faith in liberal ideals of progress and public education (Cousens, 2023: 155–161). After the homophobic discourse of the McCarthy era, for the first time, gender was being advanced as unrelated to sexuality- a category of experience and subjectivity in its own right. This began around 1961 when Virginia Prince applied John Money's novel concept of 'gender role' to her own situation at the time, a self-identified heterosexual transvestite splitting her time between her masculine and her feminine gender roles. Prince's authority as a pharmacologist, connections to leading clinicians, and her proficiency in liberal white feminist justifications for equality between the sexes, led to the mainstreaming of a sex/gender distinction in the work of her colleagues, including Harry Benjamin and Robert Stoller (Cousens, 2025). With the backing of Reed Erickson, a supremely wealthy trans man, the

first gender identity clinic was opened in 1965 at Johns Hopkins University. This changing landscape seemed to offer an opportunity for well-connected trans people to shape the understandings of gender amongst the public and professionals, as well as at the level of the trans community. As the number of trans groups proliferated across America in the 1960s and 70s, many of them sought the validation of sexologists such as Harry Benjamin and Vern Bullough- in turn hoping to educate the medical profession about just how nice, normal, and deserving of non-pathologized clinical care (some) trans people were. Whilst the relationship between the clinic and the community is not the focus of our discussion, we highlight this to clarify the importance of resisting clear divisions between the two - and to acknowledge that the transvestite subcultures discussed here frequently established close, co-operative relationships with future medical gatekeepers, often at the same time as they authored stringent critiques of the place of 'experts' in self-determination .

Transvestite taxonomies

Subdivisions within the transvestite identity category, and circumscribed delimiting of the boundaries for inclusion, were built into periodical culture from the start. Prince (1960: 53) lamented to readers in one of the first issues of *Transvestia* that

> it is deemed necessary by psychologists, psychiatrists and others to use a qualifying word or phrase when discussing Transvestism to indicate the sexual orientation of the individual. Thus we read, 'Heterosexual Transvestite,' or we find the phrase, 'most Transvestites are heterosexual.' It seems to me if a person's sole or principle deviation from the norm is that of liking the clothing of the opposite sex, that he, and only he (or she), should be designated a Transvestite – period.

In the same issue she went on to argue that the word transvestite 'should be applied to and reserved for those persons whose sole, or at least principle, non-conformist tendency is that of loving clothes of the opposite sex. It should not be applied to homosexuals or others to whom the wearing of the clothing is incidental to their homosexual or other activities' (1960: 54). Although Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld had argued that homosexuality and transvestism were discrete phenomenon almost 50 years earlier, many of the American research community were slow to translate and incorporate English and European sexology into their theories. Prince's argument to the scientific and 'lay' gender communities was that US researchers still neglected to understand this basic fact: that transvestites were generally not homosexual. By the following year, Prince had created the first of many conceptual containers for her ostensibly desexualized, but implicitly heteronormative, understanding of cross-dressing: true transvestite. Through exorcism, gay transvestites or drag queens could be reclassified under Prince's ontological taxonomy not as a form of trans femininity, but as a disparaged type of homosexual. And at both a subcultural level and through her connections with leading clinical practitioners: she won. Her taxonomical anchoring of transvestism to heterosexuality found its way into Stoller's *Sex and Gender, vol. 1* and the DSMIII, and provided the epistemological

foundations for many of subsequent intra-community theorizations of 'transvestite' that followed.

Before we discuss these acerbic subdivisions of transvestite, it is worth highlighting the ways members commonly understood the two largest categories within this subculture: (heterosexual) transvestites and transsexuals. Like all terms, these definitions were porous, incoherent, often varied across subcultural contexts, and how a self-proclaimed embodier of a term lived often ran contrary to its definition. For some community members, ontological divisions between transvestites and transsexuals were fallacious. In a Guest Editorial op-ed in *Empathy Forum Club's* newsletter, for example, Joan writes that as the more liberal social expectations of the 60s and 70s become increasingly deep set, there may be many more '"butterflies" who find ourselves on the TV to TS transition cycle' (1975: 1). For those in the majority it seems, who did not share her butterfly thesis, a transvestite was commonly understood to be a temporarily trans feminine person with one's purported 'home' gender being manhood.[4] One would dress and otherwise adorn themselves (trans) femininely on certain occasions, like social club events or in locked hotel rooms, and potentially peruse electrolysis. However, one would certainly not undergo surgeries and, with a few exceptions including Prince herself, not take hormones. Key to this term was the supposed liminality of one's (trans) femininity.

By contrast, transsexual was a permanent identity. In her day-to-day life, a transsexual lived openly as a woman, she obtained vaginoplasty if she could afford to, took hormones, and it was often assumed that she would leave the subculture for greener heteronormative pastures. Despite transsexual women sometimes minimizing their community involvement post-vaginoplasty, transsexual womanhood remains an enduring and easily legible identity within 20th-century trans sociality. Yet, it is the capricious, and now exorcized category of transvestite which birthed the richest and most dynamic ontological intellectual project within these social worlds. Here taxonomic discourse flowed over what constituted transvestism, and perpetual attempts to put forth new micro-to-macro identities were central to the subculture's proliferating internal divisions.

The most pressing question for transvestites was what qualified one to be a transvestite, and the usual answer engaged with some form of sexuality. Typically, investments in heterosexuality distinguished the respectability-oriented members of the community from the degraded and racialized 'drag queens' who had sex with men, and were therefore either gay, or (just as bad) sex-workers. For such adherents heterosexuality meant sex with, or attraction to, a non-trans woman. Though some subculture members would have likely expanded their heterosexual matrix to include transsexual women, for a transvestite to have sex with one like herself would have been sinfully queer. A transvestite all dolled up in high-femme lingerie having sex with her non-trans wife might read as, if not sapphic, certainly a little queer to us, but many transvestites who would have had sex in this way, oftentimes acerbically resisted any identification with sexual non-normativity. Indeed, Jules Gill-Peterson has noted this paradoxical queerness/heterosexuality in the potential lesbian reading of such relationships (2022). Importantly, however, many of these overwhelmingly white subculture members were closeted and existed in public and private spheres as ostensibly 'normal' middle-class men. Such material context underpinned the taxonomic discourses which fueled attempts to distance themselves from any

hint of queer or gay trans femininity. Holding closely to a moralized sex-gender distinction wherein accessing the full range of gender expression is healthy, but 'sex' deviance (either homosexual or transsexual) is sinful or pathological, for heterosexual transvestites, their possession and erotic use of a penis took precedence over gender on the question of sexuality.

For other subcultural members, the essentialist idea that one's anatomy was the 'truth' of one's sexuality was highly contested. In 1971, trans femme community leader and theorist of the 'male lesbian' identity formation, Sally Douglas, started an organization *Salmacis,* for trans femmes looking for social and erotic connections with other feminine people: trans or non-trans. The hundreds of trans femmes who joined *Salmacis* over its decade long existence and engaged with its newsletters and flyers, understood themselves as lesbians because of the significance of their gender to their own conceptualizations of their sexuality (Pihlak and Cousens, 2025). As girls who desired femininity in themselves and others, anatomy was completely disinvested as a site of sex/gender truth or significance.

In the same year that Douglas founded *Salmacis*, the premiere 1971 issue of *Drag Queens: A Magazine about the Transvestite* (later *Drag)* theorized the difference between the drag queens and transvestites not simply in terms of sexuality or race and class, but also one's trans femme style. In an article titled 'Drag Queen versus Transvestite' the unnamed author explained that 'The "drag queen" is one of the many different types of the transvestite phenomenon. He is many times more militant and flamboyant than his transvestite "sisters". The drag queen is almost always of the homosexual variety of transvestite, and is usually more relaxed and realistic than the other types' (1971: 11–12) Here, militancy indexes the more direct action-oriented forms of world-making and resistance undertaken by those organizing under the banner of 'drag queen' and the affirmation of 'flamboyance' alongside the comparatively 'more relaxed and realistic' embodiment of her femininity suggests that the drag queen is both more comfortable in her feminine self-fashioning, and more willing to take risks in expressing herself how she desires.

Alliances between self-proclaimed heterosexual transvestites and drag queens were unfortunately rare, despite their shared trans femininity. It seems that privilege (whiteness, heterosexuality and class status), and likely fear of being disdained by association with sex work and homelessness, frustrated potential solidarities between the ostensibly straight and more recognizably queer transfeminine worlds of the period. When longtime *Tapestry* editor-in-chief Merissa Sherill Lynn met street-based sex worker and brown trans feminine revolutionary Sylvia Rivera in 1984, she noted that, 'Sylvia represents a segment of our Community that is totally foreign to me - drag queens, and the city streets. It is not a segment in which most of us would long survive.' (Lynn, 1984: 26) That Lynn, a Boston-based influential organizer within the trans community in this period, and editor of the most widely circulated trans community journal, did not meet Rivera until 1984, and when she did, encountered her as worlds apart, demonstrates the distinctly different priorities that animated parallel trans communities at the time. These divisions derived from material and structural bases, rather than linguistic ones. Both Lynn and Rivera understood themselves within the umbrella of trans femininity. Yet, exemplifying Emma

Heaney's insight that 'bodies and relationships don't exist as theoretical objects extracted from the material conditions in which they dwell' (2018: 137) Lynn and Rivera's experiences of sexed embodiment were markedly different due to their divergent histories and circumstances. Lynn; white, middle-class and securely housed; Rivera; 'broke', racialized, in and out of prison, and homeless- these trans femme community organizers had markedly differed lived experiences of femininity and womanhood. As such, the activist priorities that arose from their distinct socio-political locations (education and dialogue for Lynn housing and survival for Rivera), were worlds apart.

It's interesting to note that whilst there were few coalitions between drag queens and heterosexual transvestites due to their different political locations, there were crossovers at the level of language and it seems that Prince's taxonomies travelled beyond her own milieu. In Esther Newton's seminal ethnographic study of 1960s female impersonators, which we may understand as a modern drag queen, there is a brief quote from an unnamed female impersonator in which they differentiate transvestites from drag queens through noting that for the former 'the true transvestite wants to sleep with women and does not consider himself a homosexual' (1972: 52 fn3). The use of 'true transvestite' seemingly reflects the sheer permeation of subcultural influence by Prince across supposedly disparate worlds, facilitated perhaps by the adoption of Prince's taxonomies by leading sexologists of the time.

Heterosexual transvestites, male lesbians and drag queens were among the 'macro' identity categories around which many in the community organized. However, one final example demonstrates the intellectual ingenuity and creative complexity possible in these subcultural spaces.

> What has hitherto been considered a single type of cross-dresser - the male heterosexual transvestite- is, in fact, two parallel types. This is the considered opinion of the author after much investigation of and pondering over the personalities, the histories, and the writings of the great many transvestites he has come to know during the past two years.

So begins a 1964 article by Rhodes (1964: 3–6). These two categories the author has studiously dedicated herself to understanding are 'Overs' and 'Unders'. The author begins from the three-fold premise that with transvestism's source arising from childhood, and 'virtually all recorded cases of transvestism begin as fetishism' in addition to 90% of trans femmes having fetishes for: '(1) high-heeled shoes; (2) intimate underwear, usually panties or bloomers; and (3) corsets and/or girdles,' then one can classify Over transvestites as having a trans feminine origin with shoes, and Unders (undergarments) deriving their transfemininity from the second and third fetishes. This was not just a typology based on favoured clothing, but instead, the author goes on to note, is complete with typical personality traits, jobs, transition timeline, home decorating sense, propensity for mental illness, along with potential for transsexualism and homosexuality. The author, Rhodes, based their analysis purportedly from an unknown number of 'intimate discussions with transvestites, personal association with them at their homes and meeting places, and lengthy correspondences.' Far from an attempt at rebellion against the medical-sexological taxonomic establishment, Rhodes suggested that after robust

scientific investigation, her theory could 'assist psychologists and psychiatrists in classifying patients who come to them for assistance in their mental travails'. In one brief article, we see a trans femme engage in taxonomic theorization apparently derived from intense research with her peers, and not out of an antagonistic position to the clinic, but in the faith that improved, more representative and community-led science would benefit the trans community.

Surprisingly, Rhodes did not convince everyone. Two issues later, Shelagh Niles criticized Rhodes for her theory's ontological flimsiness, having conducted her own testing of this potentially important finding (1965: 30–31). Niles based her criticism off engagement from her relationships with purportedly 70 fellow transvestites. She presented 26 of them with Rhodes' theory after which 15 classified themselves as Unders and 11 as Overs. Yet both groups rejected the theory, and indeed the author notes only one Under seemed to match Rhodes' overall typology. This earnestly conducted and shared research is certainly in the image of sexology, and the methods- discourse and questioning of those in the transvestite community- is remarkably similar to what leading sexologists like Benjamin, Kinsey and Stoller were doing at the time. Moreover, whilst trans-misogynistic hierarchies of knowing have prevented these conversations being credited or mainstreamed, this community-led research was often more meticulous than, for example, the hasty and objectifying yet esteemed theories of Robert Stoller (1984: xv–xvi). In addition to deriving conclusions based on less than a handful of case studies, Stoller is open about his more whimsical methodology

> each day's activities are determined by what I shall enjoy, not what a proper researcher should do. So I more or less meander, focusing for a few years on the biologically intersexed, then transsexuals, then those with gender perversions, then the parents of children with gender disorders and, impending, the perversions at large. Such an approach suggests important areas may be missed or not studied in enough depth.

Taxonomy provided a means to establish new sociologies of the self, that did not depend on the authority of 'so-called experts' like Stoller. Often in dialogue with prevailing sexological discourses, yet with the embodied and embedded expertise to be the authorities on gender non-normativity at the time, many in the trans community took it upon themselves to author what they believed to be more accurate taxonomies than those circulated by 'poorly-briefed reporters and psychologists' (Canon, 1979: 4). *Journal of Male Feminism* editor, Susan Canon, writes 'we must go back to the source again and again; and on most of our subjects, our sources are not Freud or Kinsey or John Hopkins or the nearby Gender Orientation enthusiast. The sources of knowledge about ourselves are ourselves' (1979: 4–5). Many sexologists recognized and depended on the expertise of these early trans communities. Indeed, institutionally embedded sexologists frequently wrote articles for or read trans feminine periodicals which provided crucial sources for their own intellectual development. In the *Turnabout* issue released before Rhodes' theoretical intervention for just one example, Harry Benjamin provided the editors with an advanced copy of a speech he later gave at the 6th annual conference for the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex in 1963.

Whilst Overs and Unders never made it into the community vernacular, the impulse to establish new gendered ontologies through naming and systematizing small differences afforded the opportunity for community formation on independent terms. Indeed, this taxonomic impulse extended beyond sorting through gendered states of being to include non-transvestic members of the community. Within the pages of *Transvestia,* premiere editorialist Susanna Valenti wrote an occasionally updated typology of a fluctuating number of tiers of (non) accepting wives, with a 1963 version of the guide ranging across a spectrum of seven tiers from acceptance, to (dis)approving neutrality, and to active hatred (1963: 69–71). Providing a historical antecedent to the endless contemporary litigation of chaser/trans-amorous discourse, an author in a 1971 issue of *Drag* argued that 'THE MALE who is attracted to the drag queen can be put into three general categories; the non-practicing transvestite, the "pure" bi- sexual, and the latent homosexual. The latent homo and TV seem to be the most prevalent.' (1971: 29) Correspondents' taxonomic impulses could thereby extend beyond discourse on the trans individuals in their subculture to include all facets of their lifeworld.

The categorical imperative then, as now, was not shared by everyone and whilst for many, feeling recognized and understanding one's place in the world depended on finding a sign that closely approximated one's subjectivity, there were others for whom such a stabilizing device was unnecessary. Just as for certain community members like the male lesbians, the appeal of 'transvesite' was not what it fixed in one's own identity, but the relational ties it named, *The Journal of Male Feminism* in 1979 put forth the pan-trans term 'paraculture' that some community members used to cover 'All such people who desire to express an opposite gender role are said to be in the culture.' (back-cover) At this time too, there were critics of attempts to taxonomize or otherwise erect rigid borders of identity. *Drag* was a relatively more open subcultural periodical and it began one editorial noting, 'Isn't it about time that all cross dressers stopped discussing semantics and started to discuss their need for freedom to express themselves in the type of dress they desire.' They went on to argue 'we should all recognize the fact that all crossdressers should have the same rights to freedom of dress regardless of their sexual orientation.' (1971: 4) In the *Journal of Male Feminism* Susan Cannon noted 'Let us not worry too much about labels or categorizing ourselves into four or five distinct subvarieties. I use "male woman" simply as a comprehensive term which tends to divide us least, but don't use even that if it restricts you psychologically' and indeed 'If we use the term "male woman", do not let it become another prejudice, another restriction.' (1979: 4) Seeking relations of solidarity without overdetermining or essentializing identities on the basis of sexuality, experience or anatomy, for many 'pan' terms offered the possibility to come together around shared commitments to a world with more liberatory gendered futures for all, and allowed for individual fluidity and change as part of this.

Transvestite taxonomies and the queer frontier

Despite being one of 'the primary signifiers of trans life for the majority of the twentieth century' (Gill-Peterson, 2021: 414), in the majority of trans studies scholarship, the

transvestite remains nowhere to be seen. Yet far from 'tragic figures who could never be their "true" selves' (Drager and Platero, 2021: 417) the transvestite communities considered here deserve to be revisited as the most organized, highly differentiated, gender community of the pre-internet twentieth century. If taxonomies are part of what distinguishes queer and trans generations from one another, are complexly constitutive of trans becoming, and delimit the boundaries of intra-community identification, then by turning our attention to the recent past and attending to the myriad of constantly evolving identity categories circulating in transvestite periodical communities, we can learn a lot about the impulses and desire for categorization that animates trans community.

Rather than offering a singular genealogy of trans taxonomy which seeks to adjudicate between 'good' or 'bad' terms, the discussions in print demonstrate that what is significant to explore is what trans taxonomies have made possible, and for whom. Alongside exclusionary, elitist and hierarchical identities like the heterosexual transvestite, there are also endless earnestly recounted discussions of what it feels like to inhabit one's gender which challenge the violent prerogatives of cisnormativity and provide the basis for the articulation of epistemically and affectively significant longings and desires. The relationship between authoring one's own identity, self-fashioning, and the establishment of signs is intimately entangled and the negotiation of identities that make their way into periodicals are premised on the idea that the gender one does, and the gender one is, cannot be clearly separated. As Julian Honkosolo observes, these activities 'which may seem minimal and private when compared to street activism and political protest' are 'nevertheless radically political because they enable the imagination and the enactment of a future that is not yet here' (2023: 285). As such, they constituted acts of survival at the level of the textual, and provided the basis for prefigurative community development.

Paradox characterizes trans taxonomies. Taxonomies are both old and new, conditions for community formation and community exclusions. They give voice to subjectivity and prevent the communication of subjectivity. They are the site of repressive power and of resistance. They have histories of coloniality and sexology, but also precede histories of epistemicide, and they are reclaimed in the wake of ongoing colonial violence. As trans Pinay theorist Jaya Jacobo notes in the contemporary Filipinix reclamation of precontact trans femininity, or binabayi that 'The binabayi is a gender that has always been there, but this genealogy of transfeminine knowledge tells us she is also now upon us' (2022: 171). The queer frontier needs to grapple with the contradictions, then, between trans and queer people's need to enter into language and community with one another, in a world where the global anti-gender movement, and the judicial battles being waged, would have us 'defined out of existence' (Malatino, 2020: 10), and with what it means to do justice to one another's pasts and possibilities within the ruins of heteronormative capitalism and in the afterlives of slavery. Transvestites did not have these answers, and reading the taxonomic impulses in transvestite print culture both reparatively and through the lens of ideology critique requires careful attention to the situatedness of writers and their own material conditions, noting the specific constraints and privileges which make certain articulations possible, and not.

Conclusion

In 1992, roughly two decades after our article's focus, Nancy Cole remarked in an issue of *The TV/TS Tapestry* that 'There is, it seems, an overabundance of people in our Community who have a burning desire to invent new words to define problems and issues that have already been defined. In the beginning, there were transvestites and transsexuals…' (1992: 64) In the intervening time between the 1970s and Cole's remark, a new conceptual container had been sweeping the subculture: transgender. As was the case in prior 'taxonomic revolutions,' the usual arguments appeared in favor or against this supposedly revolutionary taxonomic silver-bullet. Some desired an umbrella term to centre coalitional politics, yet others stridently argued for the continuation of differentiated terms were preferrable was once again high on the agenda.[5] Three years later, amongst a certain white subcultural trans milieu 'transgender' became the new standard and the editorial team of the *TV/TS Tapestry* trumpeted their name-change to the *Transgender Tapestry.* In their announcement the editorial team defined transgender as 'anyone and everyone is transgendered who transgresses gender lines even slightly in their behavior or attitudes.' As the editorial team put forth that, 'since our bodies manufacture the hormones associated with both sexes. We all possess some of the qualities we associate with being female and being male,' and they concluded that 'looked at from this point of view, everyone is a bit TG' (1995: 1) After decades of print publications dedicating pages to the relative merits of or granular distinctions between various micro-identities, it seemed a pan term offering a majoritizing collapse of the non-trans/trans binary had triumphed.

The remarkably familiar queer frontier of yesteryear, however, offers cautionary tales for those seeking to advance a similar 'an assault on the genre of the binary' (Bey, 2022: 53) today. In the early 1990s, 'transgender' would be foisted upon countless racialized gender-non-normative communities who had *not* been part of its collective intellectual formation. In the Spring 1994 issue of *Tapestry*, Jessica M. Xavier noted the pushback she received from fellow Black trans femmes who were proud drag queens that fiercely resisted the imposition of the label transgender. Ms Xavier noted 'many drag queens know that the vast majority of transgenders are heterosexual crossdressers, and if you're proud to be gay, you certainly don't want to be lumped together with a bunch of straight "transies."' (1994: 30) However, as the renaming of the journal soon after Ms Xavier's critique demonstrates, these concerns were not heard by the white editors. The taxonomical impulse, central to trans becoming, is unlikely to fade in the coming years. Yet as this article has discussed, trans taxonomies contain their own gender trouble. Signs are both the tool we have to imagine and build new worlds and relationalities, and the potentially violent site of misrecognition, foreclosure and erasure.

Our own contribution to the genealogy of today's taxonomical renaissance has turned to the now anachronistic, but once predominant, umbrella category of 'transvestite' to consider how dynamics of power and privilege, wealth and whiteness, inform the material impacts of categorical maneuvers. The impulse to reclaim authorship over naming apparatuses is a recurrent feature of the formation of individual and collective trans identities. Rather than adjudicate between more or less politically promising acts of naming, perhaps the more fruitful endeavor is to understand 'trans' to accommodate necessary oscillations between discrete identities and community umbrellas, and for it to

offer an epistemic framework in which differences in experience and location can inform and enrich one another.

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Notes

1. Francine Logandice spent the 1970s researching a bibliography of all things trans, to send to interested libraries. This list is taken from her collection at the GLBT Historical Society Archives, San Francisco, California: Carton 1, Folder 12–14. See Logandice's oral history interview with Susan Stryker for details on her career as a queer and trans bar owner in San Francisco: Stryker (1997) "Francine Logandice Interview Transcript." Oral History 1997. Available: https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/5x21tf59w.
2. See for e.g., Jay Prosser, 1998, "Second Skins", Juliet Jacques, 2017, "Forms of Resistance" and Aren Aizura, 2018 "Mobile Subjects".
3. For more detailed accounts of the taxonomic revolution and the various macro and micro-identities it spawned, see David Valentine, Esther Newton, Robert Hill and Joanne Meyerowitz.
4. Though femme correspondents would occasionally acknowledge the existence of trans mascs, the majority of these taxonomic discourses solely focused on trans feminine ontologies.
5. In 1991 Virginia Prince, who would later claim to have invented the term, argued against transgender as "the commonly used term "transgendered" to describe the community is not correct to begin with because most of the members of the community have not 'trans-'ed. anything except on a very temporary basis. The consistent and therefore proper word to describe the community as a whole should therefore be 'bigendered' which it is." Her proposed solution just happened to be her favoured term.

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