

WHY TRANS METHODS IN MANUSCRIPT STUDIES?

Records, if conceived of and activated for liberatory aims,
have the power to change ourselves and the world.

Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 116.

THE ARCHIVE HAS liberatory potential, but it is not there yet. The actions needed to get there, archival theorist Michelle Caswell suspects, “will be wild, impractical, impossible.”¹ However, they will also be raucous and transformative. Liberatory archives, Caswell instructs, must dispense with the idea that archival work is morally or ethically neutral. Instead, they should embrace the potential that archives, and the objects they contain, have to bring communities together, to reject positivist temporalities, and to use the past to build “a liberatory now.”² Archives’ liberatory power derives from the spaces they occupy and the communities those spaces prioritize, but also from the objects they house and the relationships that those objects have with one another, the formations such relationships take, and the things that we do with them. In this book, I address the medieval objects that we find in the archives and how we deploy them in support of, or resistance to, structures of cultural and political power.

Caswell locates her book, *Urgent Archives*, within a critical movement that aims “to extricate archival theory and practice from the constraints of the oppressive systems in which it is rooted and for which it has been a tool.” “[C]ritical approaches to archival theory and practice are unabashedly emancipatory in aim, emphasizing the structural and interlocking nature of various forms of oppression, white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy foremost among them.”³ We recognize the archive—here conceived as both the space in which records are kept, and the curated collection of materials within such spaces—as a political space. In the national and institutional archives of anglophone countries, choices made about what is collected and in what condition it is preserved have shaped and curated a version of

1 Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 116.

2 Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 13.

3 Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 12.

history that privileges certain (white, cishetero, masculinist) stories over any other. But renegotiating collecting and hiring priorities in favour of greater institutional diversity, will not—by itself—function to disrupt those narratives. The problem is (also) structural, and structural problems require structural and methodological solutions.⁴ How a collection is labelled or catalogued; where it is kept and in what condition; who may access it, where, and when: these are all decisions made by people with structural and institutional power. Critical archival studies uses postmodern critique and activist praxis to surface these choices and the power structures that inform them.

Critical bibliography and critical library studies share many of the same objectives. According to the Bibliographical Society of America:

bibliography examines the artifactual value of texts—including books, manuscripts, and digital texts—and how they reflect the people and cultures that created, acquired, and exchanged them. Bibliographers study the technologies used to carry texts to readers, valuing the close physical analysis of material artifacts and the social and economic systems that disperse texts in all their various forms around the globe.⁵

The study of books, then, is deeply enmeshed in the study of cultural structures. Critical bibliography, Lisa Maruca and Kate Ozment suggest, “explores how critical theories can (re)shape our histories of the book and bookish objects and in turn how bibliography can be used as a tool to resist oppression.”⁶ Like critical archive studies and critical library and information science, critical bibliography takes its cue from critical theory, the emancipatory mode that developed out of the Frankfurt School into the parallel discourses of, for example, queer theory, disability studies, critical race studies, and ecocriticism. “[W]hat if,” Leah Price asked in 2006, “instead of asking what book history can do for literary criticism, we asked what literary theory can do for book history?”⁷ Critical bibliography engages theory to critique or criticize the field of bibliography, its methods, materials, inclusions, and exclusions; to formulate new approaches to bibliographical materials that redress such exclusions; and to deploy both of these things to liberatory ends.⁸

4 See Honma, “Trippin’ Over”; Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory”; Ramirez, “Being Assumed Not to Be.”

5 Bibliographical Society of America. “What is Bibliography?”

6 Maruca and Ozment, “What is Critical Bibliography?,” 232.

7 Price, “Reading Matter,” 15.

8 See, for example, the various definitions given by Maruca and Ozment, “What is Critical Bibliography?”; Strakhov, “Opening Pandora’s Box”; or Suarez, “Hard Cases.”

Formulations of the emancipatory function of critical bibliography owe much to Derrick R. Spires's keynote at the 2021 annual meeting of the Bibliographical Society of America, "On Liberation Bibliography." Spires asks, in relation to research on the work of Black librarians in the second half of the twentieth century, "What use does bibliographical study serve in a moment of national reckoning (once again) with systemic racism and white supremacy?"⁹ The term "Liberation bibliography" was coined by librarian Barbara Fister, and draws on the work of liberation theology, an approach to Christian theology developed by Latin American and African American communities that emphasizes social justice as its core mission.¹⁰ "Liberation bibliography," Spires explains, is the "conscious and intentional practice of identifying and repairing the harms of systemic racism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other oppressive structures in and through bibliography and bibliographical study." Books and their histories, he suggests, can be a path to freedom. However, methodological change is needed to make that happen: "Some elements of current bibliographical practice may well be incompatible with liberation bibliography, precisely because they are premised on erasure, devaluing knowledge systems, or perpetuating colonial archival practices."¹¹ Critical archival work, Caswell insists, should offer alternatives, "imagining new ways of thinking about and doing archives that emancipate rather than oppress."¹²

This book contributes to the emancipatory work of critical bibliography through the approach of trans studies. According to Susan Stryker, the cultural historian and co-founder of the journal *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, trans studies is:

concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the *cultural mechanisms* that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.¹³

9 Spires, "Liberation Bibliography," 4.

10 Fister, "Trumping Ownership."

11 Spires, "Liberation Bibliography," 7.

12 Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 13.

13 Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," 3, emphasis mine.

The production, transmission, sharing, saving, using, and disposing of knowledge in the form of written media is one such *cultural mechanism*. Trans studies developed in response to a need to unpick the ways that media objects produce, perpetuate, and police normative binary gender formations. Trans studies approaches, then, are bibliographical. Such approaches, I propose, offer emancipatory tactics for navigating and circumventing the oppressive logics baked into bibliographic method.

In my use of verbs like “produce” and “police,” I do not intend to position books and other written objects as independent actors within systems of oppression. The idea that objects have “their own agency to shape human action” is well theorized by critics like Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett. Agency, in this context, is relational, and denotes the influence that objects might have over the ways we respond to them. Daniel Wakelin picks up on these ideas when he comments on the effect of material conditions on scribe’s attempts to conform to an idealized sense of the text. Here, the condition of the exemplar, the parchment, the quill, and the ink all impact what it is possible for the scribe to produce. Like Wakelin, in this book, I understand manuscripts as not just the outputs of individual scribes, but as products that work in concert with local material constraints and wider societal expectations (of the book and the text, but also, of hierarchies of power). When I suggest that a manuscript might “police,” for example, socially acceptable embodiment, then, I mean both that books and the texts that they contain reflect the concerns of the society that produced them, but also that they are materially enmeshed in that culture as tools of cultural transmission. Just as Wakelin may look to the form of the book in order to understand how scribes imagined poetic text, we might also look to books as a measure of social or political values.¹⁴ Moreover, what we say and do with books, as demonstrated by critical archival studies, is enmeshed in our own systems of influence. Trans studies, I offer, as a model for unpicking the relational and structural uses of such objects.

For my use of the word tactic, I am indebted to Ingrid Nelson’s *Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Later Medieval England* (2017). “In tactical practices,” Nelson says, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, “subjects find unauthorized, spontaneous, and makeshift pathways among institutional structures.” Middle English lyric, Nelson suggests, uses “tactical reliance on and departure from institutional forms of textual production...to shape itself into as a distinct kind of literary object and to reform

14 Wakelin, *Immaterial Texts*, 9–11, quoted at 9.

the structures that shaped it.”¹⁵ I am not proposing here a need to abandon or give up on traditional modes of book historical inquiry wholesale—although, like Spires, I offer suggestions about where such methods might need rethinking. Rather, I posit that trans theory can be used to navigate, supplement, and provide alternatives to work around such methods in ways that anticipate, identify, and reject or defy histories of exclusion.

I cast this offering as a bibliographic “experiment.” The word “experiment” is intended to conjure some of the possibility of Caswell’s call to “cultivate the joys of disruption,” and “imagin[e] what does not exist yet.”¹⁶ It is also intended as a reflection on the structure and form of the book. My interventions, like those of critical bibliography more widely, are still in their infancy. In this book I stage a thought experiment that asks, what would manuscript studies look like if we attended to trans people and trans method? And, more broadly, what would bibliography look like if it attended to minoritized critique? What would bibliography look like if it shed “systemic racism, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and other oppressive structures?”¹⁷ My answer to these questions is not perfect: it is a starting point. This book is not a handbook or guide to *doing* trans bibliography or codicology. Rather, it is an account of my own foray into that *doing*, which I offer up as an example of what trans approaches to the history of the medieval book *could* be like. It is necessarily impacted by my positionality and hampered by my blind spots. It is an experiment: in joy, in imagination, as well as in critique and frustration.

A book as short as this one cannot hope to provide a comprehensive introduction to either the methods of manuscript studies or the critical development of trans theory. Both fields have extensive intellectual histories; both are varied and interdisciplinary in their interests; both may be engaged as a supporting framework, or as an object of independent inquiry; and neither can be easily summarized. As a result, my treatment of each will—unavoidably—be briefer than some readers would like. However, I aim to treat both areas at a level that welcomes beginners; to make an effort to explain clearly those concepts that underpin my argument; and to signpost key names, works, and methods for those who want to read further.

15 Nelson, *Lyric Tactics*, 4.

16 Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 22 and 12.

17 Spires, “Liberation Bibliography,” 5.

Manuscript Studies

In the introduction to their special issue of *postmedieval* on “Queer Philology,” Roberta Magnani and Diane Watt emphasize the cisheterosexist patriarchal models that underpin methods in manuscript studies.¹⁸ In Chapter 1, I elaborate on Magnani and Watt’s critique by identifying the oppressive normative models that structured the formalizing of the field—in the form of the related disciplines of philology and paleography—in the late eighteenth century. These disciplines laid the groundwork for current methods in book history, and legacies of that foundation perpetuate in current methodological approaches. However, alternative histories are also possible, and models from feminist, Black, and trans studies provide an opening to imagining a field that is otherwise.

While in life I prefer to think of myself as a book historian, for the purpose of this book I use several terms to designate my field of study, with the intention of being clear about my remit at any given point. Elsewhere, I have called my work in this area “trans codicology.”¹⁹ However, the term codicology—which in some quarters of manuscript studies has developed a wider colloquial sense—technically refers only to studies of the physical structure of the manuscript book (codex).²⁰ The methodological considerations presented here are not limited to ideas about material, form, and structure. The subtitle, *An Experiment in Bibliography*, situates this book within the wider areas of labour and study to which I hope to contribute. Beyond the formalized names of the various Bibliographical Societies, many medievalists associate this term with methods in print-based research. However, as we saw above, bibliography can be more expansive, both methodologically and socially, bringing together a wider community of book-workers including librarians, booksellers, publishers, archivists, collectors, and those with other more tangential interests in the material text. In particular, my use of the term signals both my contribution to the aims of critical bibliography; and my debt to the growing field of queer bibliography, which attends first to the study of “queer material,” but also describes “a bibliography which uses queer theories and methods, or otherwise aligns with or activates queer sensibilities,” and to which I return in Chapter 1.²¹ However, I refer

18 Magnani and Watt, “Queer Philology,” esp. 252–56.

19 Sargan, “Trans Codicology.”

20 See, for example, Stewart, “Codicology.”

21 Noble and Pyke, “Queer Bibliography,” 152.

most often to manuscript studies. Its short length means that the scope of the book is limited. While I remain hopeful that some of my observations will be relevant to those working on earlier or later materials, I acknowledge that such materials require their own methodological considerations. I am a medievalist trained in the European tradition and the premodern manuscript book remains the focus of my claims. My examples are taken primarily from later medieval Northern Europe, with a focus on post-Conquest England. I also use the term “book history.” I do so usually when I am indicating areas of methodological coherence between this book and the work of scholars and critics engaged in the study of other material textual objects.

Manuscript studies, as a field, has a reputation for conservatism. To comment on the resistance successive generations of book historians have shown to the provocations of critical theory has become its own convention, and it may be redundant to repeat such critiques at any length. Perhaps the stage was set in 1998, when Ezra Greenspan and Jonathan Rose, the editors of the field’s newly-minted eponymous journal, wrote that “[w]ith the exhaustion of literary theory, younger professors of literature are finding that book history provides a more rigorous and empirical approach.”²² For Leah Price, the study of the material text became known “as a bolt-hole from which to wait...out” theoretical debates.²³ However, critiques like Price’s mask a more fraught reality, in which attempts to integrate approaches from critical theory have been frequently made, but rarely absorbed. In medieval histories of the book, such interventions include feminist and postcolonial work in the 1990s, and prominently, the New Materialisms of the 2000s.²⁴ Happily, successive waves of critique have extended the purview of manuscript studies to include subjects like labour, race, gender, and class. However, the incorporation of subjects from critical theory does not amount to reckoning with the theory itself. Kate Ozment notes this disparity across the discipline, where she identifies “a gap between practice and identity, between how current book historical scholarship embraces diverse methodologies and subjects but must do so by remediating a bibliographical history and an inheritance that limits the efficacy of key philosophies and approaches.”²⁵ In other

22 Greenspan and Rose, “Introduction to Book History,” x.

23 Price, “Reading Matter,” 15.

24 For an example of each, see Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose*; Ghosh, “The Slave of MS. H.6.”; Robertson, “Medieval Things.” For more detailed historiography, see Robertson, “Feminism and Medieval Studies”; Holsinger, “Medieval Studies.”

25 Ozment, “Feminist Bibliography,” 151.

words, scholars have become more attuned to the contributions of women to early printing history (for example), but they have done so by recovering the names of female printers, rather than by adjusting the parameters of the field (by looking for alternative historiographies that include “women’s bibliographic labor”),²⁶ or integrating “tools” for feminist scholars to use in their work. What would a book history that incorporated and prioritized feminist theories of reproductive labour look like, for example?²⁷

Manuscript scholars have voiced similar concerns. For instance, Sonja Drimmer, echoing Daniel Wakelin, has observed the “lacuna of theoretically driven inquiry in paleographical studies.”²⁸ Drimmer’s article, “Queer Transmissions: English Manuscript, Italian Print and a Discomforting History of the Book,” calls on us to “discomfort the history of the book,” drawing on theorist Sara Ahmed’s formulation of comfort as a “fitting in” to normative space. Here she argues that “[s]cholars’ commitment to technological sequentiality has long been informed by [the] heteropatriarchal paradigm” of “compulsory heterotemporality,” in which manuscript begets print begets digital text. Within this framework, any examples that “fail to satisfy the genealogical model” become “curiosities” requiring explanation. But such explanations tend to reinforce disciplinary norms, rather than resist them:²⁹ they are cast, in effect, as “the exception(s) that proves the rule.” Drimmer turns to queer and trans theory to disrupt both the technological positivism of this dominant narrative, and to question the implicit boundaries it sets up between different technologies (the idea that “a manuscript is one thing, a printed book is another.”)³⁰ She challenges the field to find in supposed outliers—in this instance, a manuscript incorporating free-hand copies of woodcuts depicting the constellation Andromeda with a feminine-coded clothed upper body (including long hair, delicate facial features, and breasts) and nude lower body with penis—“a different logic about the role of new technologies in society” and the ways they re-present themselves as already enmeshed with other book-ish devices.³¹ Such challenges address what I,

26 Ozment, “Feminist Bibliography,” 167–72, with discussion of this terminology at 167.

27 For more on reproductive labour, including a history of thought on the subject, see (among others) Ferguson, *Women and Work*.

28 Drimmer, “Connoisseurship,” 426. See, also, Wakelin, “Paleography.”

29 Drimmer, “Queer Transmissions,” 7. For “compulsory heterotemporality,” see also, per Drimmer: Menon, *Unhistorical Shakespeare*, 1–4.

30 Drimmer, “Queer Transmissions,” 5.

31 Drimmer, “Queer Transmissions,” 25.

and Drimmer, perceive as a widening disconnect between subject (what we study: gender, disability, race, non-binary depictions of Andromeda) and method (how we study it: or, as Drimmer describes it, “the heteronormative backbone of book historical methods and epistemologies.”)³²

One impediment to theorizing manuscript studies and its orienting structures is the assumption that research into the tangible forms of material objects deals in measurable facts. Such thinking preserves a position of distance that holds our objects and the relationships we have with them at arm’s length, preventing us from grappling with the mechanics of embodiment and perception that facilitate empirical knowledge creation.³³ This is not to say that *truth* or *facts* don’t exist, of course; simply that they are not innate or unmediated and may not ultimately be verifiable. In her methodological critique of “attributive palaeography,” Drimmer presents several models for describing the intuitive work of identifying scribal hands that decentre “verifiability” in favour of examining the “aspect shifts” that prompt attribution. A failure to interrogate the motivations and mechanics behind the methods that we have inherited, she suggests, has resulted in an intellectual catch-22—an “impasse,” in her terms—in which the same, supposedly-measurable, features of script can be employed to make opposing arguments. She calls on the field to re-think those sensations of recognition—in this case, of a particular scribe’s handwriting—and articulate the shift as a point of departure, rather than attempting to “scientizing” it.³⁴ Her call pre-empts my own challenge to “take [...] affective embodied response seriously” as a source of book historical knowledge.³⁵ Trans Studies, I suggest, can help to articulate this reorientation.

Other hurdles are posed by the legacies of the cisheterosexist, white supremacist, and patriarchal logics that organize the discipline. In this book, these terms primarily function as structural critique—a way of describing

32 Drimmer, “Queer Transmissions,” 7. Similarly, Kathleen Kennedy relates the absence of work on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English illumination to an absence of artistic theory designed to cope with the genre: such aniconic works, Kennedy shows, do not fit into the representation-based models for pre-abstractionist art. A turn to media theory, she proposes, provides the tools to analyze late medieval illumination in its own right (and not as a substandard version of continental and/or underdeveloped predecessor to Tudor techniques.) Kennedy, *Illuminating Media*: I am grateful to Kennedy for sharing the pre-press version of her introduction with me.

33 For an expansion on this problematic, see Sargan, “Trans Codicology,” 574–77.

34 See Drimmer, “Connoisseurship,” 456–59.

35 Sargan, “Trans Codicology,” 572.

the oppressive systems that organize and distribute power in society and its institutions—not as an expression of personal politics. Readers unfamiliar with this usage may feel defensive about their employment, particularly in reference to a small and close-knit field. However, it is important that we name the dynamics of power within which our field is enmeshed. First, as Magnani and Watt have shown, these structures are baked into the methods and models that form the bread and butter of manuscript studies. Second, as Ozment, Drimmer, and others suggest, they remain central to the unconscious biases that shape whose opinion matters. Trans studies, I show, provides approaches to identify and clarify the field's kyriarchal investments, while offering tools to circumvent their legacy in current methodologies.

Trans Studies

In this book, trans is an expansive category. I follow Stryker in using trans to describe any person “who move[s] away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans*-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.”³⁶ One critique of trans studies—the quiet fear of many trans scholars—is that our readings of gender may be overdetermined: reading today's trans experiences onto the lives of innocent cis people who did not conceive of the sex-gender-sexuality spectrum in the way that we do today. It is important that trans histories do not reproduce in the past the narratives of transness found in the present. Stryker's approach highlights that gender is a culturally and historically situated experience. Stryker formulates transness as an open analytic through which to understand the ways that normative categories of gender and sexuality have been imposed in various times and places; identify those that subvert such categories; and learn from their methods of resistance and survival.

Florence Ashley's conception of trans as one of a range of “gender modalities” is helpful here. As Ashley, Shari Brightly-Brown, and G. Nic Rider recognize, “[h]uman experiences are inevitably richer than the categories we carve out for them.”³⁷ The concept responds to the legal and medical need to distinguish between a person's “gender identity” (“their sense of gender at any given time”) and “how [their] gender identity relates to the gender they were assigned at birth.”³⁸ Of particular relevance in this book is Stryker's

36 Stryker, *Transgender History*, 1.

37 Ashley, Brightly-Brown, and Riger, “Trans/Cis Binary,” 294.

38 Ashley, Brightly-Brown, and Riger, “Trans/Cis Binary,” 294.

foregrounding of trans as process: a process of “crossing over,” inherent in the etymology of the word, that allows us to understand trans as methodology to cut across the binary formulations of gender and sexuality produced by cultural institutions. The term “modality” shifts the focus from gender as identity (which trans and cis women, for example, may share) toward gender as process. Modalities signal ways of being in the world: “a mode or way of being one’s gender.”³⁹ In recognizing the processual nature of both trans and gender, this book understands trans theory as a *method* of investigation as well as a *subject* for investigation.

At the time of writing, United States legislators have introduced 905 anti-trans bills—ranging from limitations on gender-affirming healthcare, to gender assessments for children’s amateur sports leagues—for discussion in state legislatures across the country this calendar year, more than any other year to date. Forty-seven bills have been introduced at the federal level, in the wake of twelve executive orders issued by the Trump White House in his first three months in office. There are currently twenty-seven states with some level of legal restriction on accessing gender affirming care, particularly for under-18s.⁴⁰ In response, seventeen states and the District of Columbia have introduced “shield” laws protecting transgender healthcare.⁴¹ This legislative call-and-response is indicative of the extent to which trans people’s right to exist has become a dehumanizing political football in anglophone countries. In the United Kingdom, transgender rights and access to care are also under threat. While reforms to the Gender Recognition Act were considered uncontroversial when Theresa May promised them in 2017, the new Labour government has pledged to continue blocking plans passed by the Scottish parliament in 2022. Meanwhile, the Cass Report, the result of a supposedly independent review of gender care in the UK judged by an international team of scholars to have “methodological flaws” and to “misrepresent[...] ...evidence,” has provided cover for the total shutdown of NHS care for transgender youth.⁴² On April 16, 2025, in the case *For Women Scotland vs. The Scottish Ministers*, the UK Supreme Court ruled that “the concept of sex is binary,” and that the definition of “sex” as it is deployed in

39 Ashley, Brightly-Brown, and Rider, “Trans/Cis Binary,” 294. See also Ashley, “Gender Modality,” 22.

40 “2025 anti-trans bills tracker.” Up year on year since recording began (with bills that made it into law provided in brackets): 2021, 143 (18); 2022, 174 (26); 2023, 615 (87); 2024, 701 (51); 2025 (year to date), 905 (100).

41 Center on Reproductive Health, Law, and Policy, “Shield Laws.”

42 Noone et al., “Critically Appraising,” 2.

the Equalities Act 2010 refers to “biological sex” (by which they mean, sex assigned at birth). The ruling maintains that transgender people are protected under other provisions of the act.⁴³ However, following the ruling, the UK’s Equality and Human Rights Commission issued an “interim update” to provide guidance on the implications of the judgment. It clarified that the definition put forward by the Supreme Court should be used regardless of whether a trans person has a gender recognition certificate (the mechanism in UK law that allows a new birth certificate to be issued), and that “trans women...should not be permitted to use the women’s facilities and trans men...should not be permitted to use the men’s facilities.”⁴⁴ This guidance has led UN experts to warn that “without corrective changes to law and policy” the UK risks violating the European Convention on Human Rights.⁴⁵

One response to current trans political insecurity might be to focus our resources on the present. This is not unreasonable: it is perhaps true that the modern dehumanization and imminent threat to the lives of trans people are not going to be resolved—at least in the immediate term—through a recourse to medieval history. However, when trans people are being forced out of physical homes, the need for a psychic home is rendered even more pressing. Histories provide grounding, legitimization, and evidence that a future is possible, especially when current circumstances suggest otherwise. “There is,” observes heritage worker and historian Kit Heyam, “a powerful, electrifying force to the resonance we feel when we realize that someone else has felt our feelings before us.”⁴⁶ Such affective resonances produce community. Trans histories, then, provide opportunities to build trans-historical communities of care that work to sustain modern trans scholars. Named fields of study develop spaces to share experiences and investments. They offer sites for coalition building among historically underrepresented groups, who have often been subjected to active exclusion.

Premodern trans studies showcases the richness of past trans experiences. Medieval people engaged in sophisticated multifaceted discourses of gender transformation and becoming: from François-e Charmaille’s reading

43 UKSC, “For Women Scotland Ltd v. The Scottish Ministers,” 50, sec. 171. The invocation of “biological” is a right-wing dog whistle and alludes to a formulation of sex that has been roundly discredited: see, for instance, Clancy et al. “Biology Is Not Binary.” The UKSC’s suggestion that the “biological characteristics that make an individual a man or a woman” are “plain and unambiguous” (50) is nonsense.

44 EHRC, “Interim Update.”

45 Office of the High Commissioner, “UN Experts Warn of Legal Uncertainty.”

46 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, 9.

of “trans climatology” in the gendering of the seasons and their effects on the gendered body, to Jonah Coman’s treatment of medieval trinitarian theology as trans ontology, saints lives, romances, trial records, natural sciences, philosophy, theology have been shown to preserve spaces for trans modes of being.⁴⁷ Tess Wingard charts the development of the field, which she contends “represents the most important development in the current and future direction of the field of medieval sexuality studies.”⁴⁸ A growing number of books, edited collections, and conference sessions on queer and trans subjects over the last five years speaks to its vivacity.⁴⁹ In 2025 alone, four major conferences have focussed on premodern trans research: “Pre and Early Modern Trans Studies 3 (PrEmoTrans)” at Boston University; the “Pre-modern Trans Studies Symposium” at the Wolf Humanities Center, University of Pennsylvania; “Trans Sainthood in Translation, ca. 400–1500” at the German Historical Institute London; and “Always Here: Non-Binary Gender, Trans Identities, and Queerness in the Global Middle Ages (c. 250–1650)” at Binghamton University, SUNY. My own work owes a huge debt to the scholars—many early in their careers—who have pioneered and together built this exciting sub-field.

Nevertheless, the material records that preserve transness remain undertheorized. Premodern trans studies, for the most part, has focused on the recognition and analysis of transness in the written and visual record, often via the articulation of trans literary theory. Literature, in particular, has provided a rich source for medieval understandings of gender variance and bodily transformation. But, records of trans people—literary or otherwise—are the exception and not the norm.⁵⁰ The trans archive, understood as collections of documents and the spaces that house them, is broadly characterized by absence: both the gaps and silences of lives not recorded, and, as John D. Wrathall has observed of “the archival issues that confront historians of sexuality,” the “silences created by the censorship of archival and

47 Charmaille, “Trans Climates”; Coman, “Queering Christ.”

48 Wingard, “Trans Middle Ages,” 933.

49 Four recent collections in particular emphasize the vibrancy of premodern trans studies: Kim and Bychowski, eds., “Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism”; Chess, Gordon, and Fisher, eds. “Early Modern Trans Studies”; Spencer-Hall and Gutt, eds., *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects*; and LaFleur, Raskolnikov, and Kłosowska, eds., *Trans Historical*. Recent monographs include DeVun, *Shape of Sex*; Maillets, *Les genre fluids*; and Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*. A rich bibliography is given by Mara-McKay et al., “Bibliography of Medieval Trans Studies.”

50 For further discussion, see Sargan, “Trans Codicology,” 571–72.

educational institutions, silences created by historians' refusal to acknowledge the sexualities of the individuals they study, and silences created by the authors of the documents historians use to reconstruct the past."⁵¹ A focus on text and image, then, means that the scope of our understanding of the premodern trans experience is governed by the limitations of the textual record and the institutions that document it.

Dealing with absences in the written record is the concern of Saidiya Hartman in her attempts to narrate "counter-histories of slavery," who mourns that the stories that exist in the archive are not about the richness of Black subject-hood, but "rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed off as insults and crass jokes."⁵² How do we engage ethically in history-making when narrating the archive risks "the contamination involved in restating the maledictions, obscenities, columns of losses and gains, and measures of value by which captive lives were inscribed and extinguished? Why subject the dead to new dangers and to a second order of violence?"⁵³ What do we do when there is no record at all? Black, trans, and Black trans and quare lives have value, whether they are acknowledged and recorded by cisheterosexist and white supremacist regimes of power or not.⁵⁴

The limitations of the archive mean that when a trans (or otherwise minoritized) person *does* appear within documentary or textual culture, the recognition of their presence is often celebrated as a moment of rediscovery or reclamation. Reclamation is a false promise: "the archive," Hartman notes, "begets a wide array of reading, but none that are capable of resuscitating" those that are lost.⁵⁵ Furthermore, as Heyam and Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski observe, the capitalist language of "reclamation" casts archival lives as transactional, as "scarce resource(s)" to be gathered and owned by particular interest groups.⁵⁶ Such proprietorial claims are troublesome when gender and the language surrounding it is understood to be culturally situated. They are also, Heyam suggests, contradictory to the ethical work that trans historians are trying to achieve in the name of community: "we do

51 Wrathall, "Provenance as Text," 165 and 166.

52 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4 and 2.

53 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 5.

54 For my use of the term "quare," see Johnson, "'Quare' Studies."

55 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.

56 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, 27.

not own or claim members of our communities...[i]nstead we make space for them.”⁵⁷ What the documents allow us to say about these individuals also raises ethical questions. If the records we work from are hostile, Hartman worries, our “own...narration” is tantamount to “further violence.”⁵⁸ In this book, I extend my suggestion that to read around the occlusions and hostilities of the textual record we need to develop “ways to read *through* the gaps” and understand the capacity of the material object “to act as a vehicle for trans histories.”⁵⁹

A more current and pressing need to read “through the gaps” is posed by current political moves to limit the circulation of information about trans lives. Over the last four US school years (2021–2025), PEN America has tracked efforts to have books removed from circulation in public libraries and schools. According to their figures, the 2023–2024 school year saw 10,046 “book bans” targeting “over 4,000 unique titles.”⁶⁰ The most challenged book that year was Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes* (2007), a novel about a school shooting that touches on the topics of homophobia, relational abuse, and teen pregnancy. Most books challenged fell into one (or more) of three overlapping categories: books with LGBTQIA+ people or characters and/or people or characters of colour; those written for queer, trans, and/or audiences of colour, usually young adults; and those addressing difficult “real world” topics, such as “grief and death, experiences with substance abuse, suicide, depression and mental health concerns, and sexual violence.” Importantly, for our purposes, these kind of actions often happen in conjunction with—or as a pre-emptive to—legislation.⁶¹ In Florida, HB 1069, requires that books challenged on the basis of “sexual conduct” be removed from circulation pending investigation.⁶² In Iowa, SF 496 introduces a requirement that library material be “age appropriate” and limits sexual content,

57 Heyam, *Before We Were Trans*, 27.

58 Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 2.

59 Sargan, “Trans Codicology,” 571.

60 PEN America recognizes three levels of “ban”: instances when books have been removed from shelves and are no longer in circulation in a given library, school, or school or library system; books “banned pending investigation,” which “includes books that are pending a review to determine what restrictions, if any, to implement on them”; and instances when access to a given title has been restricted to certain categories of reader, usually certain age groups or grades (“banned by restriction”). 4,295 books were subject to outright bans: Meehan et al., “Banned in the USA.”

61 Meehan et al., “Banned in the USA.”

62 For the text of the bill, see “Bill Text: FL H1069.”

interpreted by the state to include any LGBTQIA+ positive material.⁶³ In both states, the legislation has had a “chilling effect” on public education, with more material challenged and more successful challenges leading to bans. In Iowa, school districts audited libraries and removed books “en masse” that *might* breach guidance on “age appropriateness.” Here, the “fear of real censorship” caused librarians and administrators to comply in advance with efforts to suppress certain topics and the people effected by them, rather than waiting to be told which materials met the legislative criteria. But in the end, “soft censorship” like this—whether undertaken in the hope of averting ideological and/or material reprisals or not—is still censorship.⁶⁴

The second Trump administration has brought federally sponsored censorship to the table too. The Trump White House has issued multiple executive orders seeking to exclude transgender people from public life by, for example, preventing them from serving in the US military, refusing access to accurate identity documents, and reducing coverage for gender affirming care.⁶⁵ References to transgender people and other minoritized groups have been removed from federally run websites. The purge included the scrubbing of Center for Disease Control public health information and data, including fact sheets about HIV testing, contraception, and creating safe and supportive classroom environments.⁶⁶ On some websites, the acronym LGBTQIA+ has been changed to LGB, in an effort to exclude transgender people from services and information, like travel safety concerns.⁶⁷ In other cases, the treatment of information was more cursory. National Parks Service staffers appeared to have searched for and removed only the word “transgender,” so that a webpage dedicated to Sylvia Rivera was left reading, “Sylvia began fighting for gay and rights.”⁶⁸ Funding cuts to the National Science Foundation, National Institute of Health, and the National Endowment for the Humanities that target projects related to race, gender, sexuality, equity and inclusion, and public health (apparently conducted in a similarly cursory fashion) threaten future trans literatures alongside destroying current ones. And, at the time of writing, there may be more to come: Project

63 For the text of the bill, see “Bill Text: IA SF496.”

64 Meehan et al., “Banned in the USA.”

65 For a more complete assessment of conditions (available, as they stood at the time of writing), see Rummler and Sosin, “All the Ways.”

66 Johnson, “Health Info Wiped.”

67 Yurcaba, “Agencies Scrub LGBTQ Web Pages.”

68 Reed, “Protests Erupt.”

2025, the manifesto that underlay the Republican presidential campaign, equates transgender literature with pornography and promises to criminalize “people who produce and distribute it...[e]ducators and librarians who purvey it...[a]nd telecommunications and technology firms that facilitate its spread.”⁶⁹

Trans tactics for navigating the absences, gaps, and suppressions of the written record are needed now. Both the threat of censorship and the need that follows it create the ethical imperative to publish this book open access. But we should remember that our movement away from (many of) those tactics is a recent one. In the neo-capitalist societies of the early twenty-first century, the internet seemed to supply an open space for trans communication, in which self-publication and circulation could bypass the policing inherent to traditional publication routes and bring information and literature to the audiences that needed them. As the above policies make clear (alongside other disasters familiar to medievalists, like the October 2023 cyberattack on the British Library), the internet can no longer be relied upon to provide such a space. However, handmade ephemera, zines, and underground presses have fulfilled similar roles in the recent past. *Transvestia*, the “first widely-distributed magazine” for assigned male at birth crossdressers and later for trans women, was founded by Virginia Prince in 1960. To protect the identities of her readership, Prince developed a coded identification system that allowed readers to place personal ads, share photos, and communicate with one another, without giving away their name or location. (*Transvestia* also offered a mail forwarding service.)⁷⁰ The codes consisted of three parts: a two digit number indicated “the number of the state in which the subscriber lives in alphabetical order”; the initial of the surname given in the subscription; and “the number of persons whose last name begins with that same initial in the order of their addition” to the subscribers list (e.g., Bobbie Thompson, 32-T-3).⁷¹ Many subscribers veiled their identities further using multiple pseudonyms. Prince routinely used at least four names; she had both masculine- and feminine-coded names for use within the community, and a different pair that she used without it.⁷² Effectively, Prince developed a multi-layered system that allowed for the

69 Karsten, “Trans Literature Preservation Project.”

70 Davis, “Trans* Women of Casa Susanna,” 630.

71 Prince, ““Breaking the Code,”” 74 as quoted by Davis, “Trans* Women of Casa Susanna,” 630.

72 Davis, “Trans* Women of Casa Susanna,” 626.

safe distribution and consumption of literature and the development of a community built on that platform.

Other tactics rely less on a well-developed social network and more on the readers' own approach to the text. As I return to in Chapter 1, such tactics might include an intuitive approach to the book that allows for affective and sensory resonances to build connections; or a rethinking of the ways that texts can be transmitted and received by trans literate audiences who understand their cues.⁷³ Some such tactics, as the wording of my title suggests (see my discussion of "bibliography" above), operate transhistorically. My comparison, in Chapter 2, between the 1345 questioning of Eleanor Rykener and the 1955 trial of Debbie Mayne, extends this possibility. Others are specific to particular times, places, and technologies. In a recent keynote for the conference "Trans Sainthood in Translation, ca. 400–1500," Roland Betancourt suggested that Byzantine readers "knew more than their text and were working with a skill set beyond that which is written in the manuscript."⁷⁴ By revisioning and relearning those tactics, or "skill sets," we develop new ways to resist a pressing reemergent problem: the restriction of public trans and queer literature and the avenues of communication that it facilitates.

Over the course of this book, I posit that by taking trans approaches to ongoing cruxes in manuscript studies caused by the legacies of cisheterosexism, we can visualize the tactics used by trans people to navigate the normative structures of the written record in the past and employ those tactics to re-form the communities they built in the present. In Chapter 1, I revisit the cisheteropatriarchal imperialist genesis of manuscript studies and its influence over current methodologies, before providing a glimpse of alternative dissident histories in the form of roads not taken in the work of early queer, Black, and female scholars. Limitations caused by the normativizing of the field combine with the normativity of most of our material records. Taking Eleanor Rykener as a case study, in Chapter 2 I show that medieval people developed tactics for navigating, co-opting, and reorienting manuscript normativity. For Rykener, the embodied performative repertoire is one such tactic. Mapping manuscript relations is central to Chapter 3. I present alternatives to the manuscript stemma—in the form of the rhizome and the constellation—that re-envision manuscripts as socially imbricated, temporally unbound, and always in the process of creation and relation. Unrooted,

⁷³ See, also, Sargan, "Trans Codicology," 581.

⁷⁴ Betancourt, "Trans In/visibility."

flexible models like these, I suggest, have always been available to readers navigating manuscript relationality. My final chapter draws the previous two together to show that networks of material relation between manuscripts, constructed through the recognition of trans skin technologies, offer modes of trans community formation across space and between times. Those looking to hack the book will find that the odd numbered chapters are more closely engaged with methodological questions, while the even numbered chapters apply those methodological discussions to manuscript examples.

