

# Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism: An Introduction

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## 1. Trans Feminism: A Showing

*And we were shown a thing, the size of a hormone pill, resting in the palm of our hands, or so it expressed itself. And it was as resistant to binaries as any drag ball. We clocked its redefined realness with the eyes of our dysphoria, wondering, “what may this become?” And this queer question was answered authentically in this way, “It is all trans feminism.” We marveled how such a thing might endure all its transitions, all its misgendering and deadnames, all the exclusions and bans, for we thought suddenly it might be named on the Day of Remembrance. And we were answered in our euphoria: it lasts and shall last so long as love sustains and affirms it. And so all true feminisms must begin and end in love. Or so we saw. Or so we were shown. Or so we hoped to see, as those who came before.*

In that showing of love called *Medieval Trans Feminism*, we work to see you—all of you—whose trans lives and trans feminisms are treated as a thing as small as a hazelnut. With hopeful striving we begin in the spirit of Julian of Norwich whose visions taught us ways to see with our bodily sights, our words of understanding, and our spiritual or ghostly sights: “All this blessed teaching of our Lord God was shown me in three parts: that is, by bodily sight, and by words formed in my understanding, and by spiritual sight. But I neither can nor may show you the spiritual vision as openly or as fully as I would like to. But I trust that our Lord God almighty will, out of his own goodness and love for you, make you receive it more spiritually and more sweetly than I can or may tell

you.”<sup>1</sup> Like our visionary foremother, we know all too well that there are many ways to be seen as well as many ways to be unseen. Our physical presences may be excluded or ignored. Our words may be misused or silenced. Our spirits may be broken and our ghosts misremembered. That is why our medieval trans feminism may never be complete but must begin with love and begin with perceiving the work and value of one another. This work is especially pressing for those who have been most erased or marginalized. Thus, although all are welcome and many hands have long been at this work, we turn now and most often to unseen parts of our feminisms with the hope that what is shown will help us to see more and see better.

Following the ordering set forth by Julian, we will introduce key elements of medieval trans feminism in a threefold method: bodily, intellectual, and spiritual. First, we will explore the history of this collection (bodily sight or sight of the bodies in the room). Second, we will review critical terms and concepts (intellectual sight or sight of the intellectual bodies of work in the room). Finally, we will introduce the critical theory, praxis, and activism of this issue as well as entries in this collection that help constitute and carry the spirit of medieval trans feminism forth in the field (spiritual sight or sight of the spirit that carries us). This three-part order recognizes that medieval trans feminism calls on us to look at ourselves and our pasts in diverse ways if we are to perceive the trans lives that might be shown there. Our introduction begins with three, and over the course of this collection our contributors will show more.

However contingent and small we begin, we compose this collection out of a hope that indeed there will be more to come. We began with a note about smallness and precariousness because we believe that these are not insufficiencies but critical points of view. Thus, while this introduction is composed as a partnership, a “we” constituted by coeditors, there will be moments in which we will fold this collective back

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1. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love (Short Text and Long Text)*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (Penguin, 1998), 11. See also Georgia Ronan Crampton, ed., *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), Part 1, lines 340-45. Available online at <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/crampton-shewings-of-julian-norwich>, accessed 4 May 2019.

to reveal specific subjective experiences recounted by M. W. Bychowski or Dorothy Kim. This is an admission that our showings of medieval trans feminism mark a point in time for a couple of those who lived in that time. Just as Julian existed within the hazelnut-like universe of her showing, so too we are the products and producers of the thing as precarious as a hormone pill that we call medieval trans feminism. Our perspectives will not be complete, our terminology may be out of date by the time the issue is read, and yet we offer this perspective as an invitation for others to share in the perceiving. We know you are out there. We see you and cannot wait for what you will show us. But first, let us see the current state of the field; let us acknowledge the brief history of the people who have occupied this space.

## 2. Bodies: A Brief History of the People in the Room

Following our guide, Julian, we start with a brief history of medieval trans feminisms. This bodily review of the matter might begin by perceiving the material conditions of the field, those bodies in the room, and all those who have been excluded from the rooms where things happen. This collection arises out of many discourses and movements but also from flesh and bone people who have worked hard to see the thing become what it has become. Admittedly, the story of medieval trans feminisms begins before we arrived, prior to the first inklings of this collection, and yet that arrival is itself a point of departure for the history of this volume. May the small history that we provide be a quilting point wherein others may sew together longer histories and intersecting histories. And now we will move onto that point.

This issue began as a special session at the 2016 Convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA), in Austin, Texas on January 7-10, 2016. The next three years would be a difficult road full of uncertainty and pushback but at this session there was an electricity in the air. Called “Medieval Trans Feminisms,” the session articulated a collective intersectional concept that many of us had witnessed in one form or another, a number of us had even imagined, but few of us had named as such. Any of these words are now and have been challenging. Medieval: often used as shorthand for old-fashioned, retrogressive, and traditional

in all senses opposed to the progressive goals of transgender and feminist activism. *Trans*: a way of thinking and being that many argue does not exist because as a prefix it messes with the constitution of any category to which it is applied (transnational, transhistorical, translational), and as an adjective, it unsettles the ontological givenness of any body to which it is applied. *Feminisms*: a word with power but also many enemies, a word that will get political or job candidates turned down, a word that administrations try to remove from course titles and descriptions because it seems too divisive, a word too with a fraught history of exclusion of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), of transgender bodies, of LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) bodies, of Global South bodies. By putting these words together, this MLA session did not only exponentially build on these anxieties, it also presented these words as working together to address, reflect, and constitutively reconsider those barriers and tensions. Each paper that was presented offered a new way in which medieval trans feminism exists but ways in which this intersectional collaborative concept might improve how we do medieval, trans, and feminist studies.

Later that year, at the 2016 meeting of the International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMS) in May, there was momentum along this intersection. At least two sessions were directly or tangentially related to transgender or intersex in the Middle Ages. Amid recent revelations of organizations promoting male dominance, and exclusivity in the field of medieval studies, there was a heightened intentionality among various groups to create unofficial threads of the conference addressing issues of gender, inclusivity, equity, and feminism. Attendees were seen walking around in shirts and buttons that read, “This is what a medievalist looks like” or “This is what feminism looks like.” In the halls, there were sympathies expressed for those trying to make “medieval studies male again” and against these nasty women (and other genders) who make a fuss about misogyny. Yet, the swelled numbers attending the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship business meeting spoke to how many diverse people saw an urgent need to address the field’s gender problems.

Then came November 2016. The US Presidential elections results affected people inside and outside the US, as well as inside and outside medieval studies. In the immediate weeks following the election, the

Trans Lifeline, a suicide hotline for transgender people, saw its highest call numbers of all time.<sup>2</sup> One can only imagine how many who called or thought of calling might have been medievalists or potential medievalists. It is hard to consider how many fewer scholars of the Middle Ages there are because of the rates of suicide in the transgender community. A recent study found that around 29.9% of trans female adolescents, 42% of non-binary adolescents, and 50% of trans male adolescents will attempt suicide in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Yet the same forces that may have taken away many potential medievalists also pushed others deeper into the work of transgender studies, including premodern trans histories. This push is further compounded by intersectionality in relation to race, disability, and other marginalized life positions. Laverne Cox made the claim, “we exist and always have,” and scholars in an emerging field of trans feminist medieval studies wanted to prove her right. Cox as an intersectional black transgender woman highlights not only the absence of transgender scholars in the field, but also the absence of BIPOC transgender scholars in the field.<sup>4</sup> It may seem hyperbolic to say that trans medieval studies might save lives. But by saying that trans people have an acknowledged past, trans people can better imagine a future. In this way, we believe our work on the past is to tell the story of trans lives for the political, intersectional, and community aims of building a future for trans lives now. At the very least, this work depends on and supports those trans and intersex persons who have been able to keep on living and working in often unlivable circumstances. It is worth pausing to consider all the things we might have been shown and all the ways we might have learned to see if only our histories, our societies, and our political choices better supported those we have lost.

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2. Sunnievie Brydum, “Trump’s win has sparked widespread anxiety among transgender Americans,” *Vox*, 18 November 2016, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2016/11/18/13664398/trump-transgender-anxiety>.

3. Susan Scutti, “Among teens, transgender males are most likely to attempt suicide, study says,” *CNN*, 11 September 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/11/health/transgender-teen-attempted-suicide-study/index.html>; Russell B. Toomey, Amy K. Syvertsen, Maura Shramko, “Transgender Adolescent Suicide Behavior,” *Pediatrics* 142, no. 4 (Oct. 2018), e20174218, doi:10.1542/peds.2017-4218.

4. Laverne Cox (@Lavernecox), tweet, 21 October 2018, 12:01 pm, <https://twitter.com/lavernecox/status/1054039939036282880>.

Going into the ICMS 2017 meeting, momentum for trans medieval studies had hit significant rapids. Amid renewed efforts in the United States to further limit transgender access to bathrooms, public schools, healthcare, and the military, as well as to curtail women's rights, attendance at this international conference in the American Midwest was challenging and full of heightened tensions. An increased number of international scholars found it harder (and would continue to find it harder) to participate in such US conferences. Later years would see papers or panels cancelled because these US policies made it impossible for scholars to attend. Those who could attend found anxieties and animosities high. Unlike the previous year, this meeting of the Congress had no sessions addressing trans or intersex topics and only a small smattering of papers. Indeed, the conference would be remembered by many for a couple papers given that openly mocked transgender people and their place in medieval history. M. W. Bychowski recalls checking Twitter as she was settling into bed for the night that Saturday, only to be alerted to the first and then the second paper expressing transphobic jokes and sentiments. Reading about the papers and the number of scholars walking out of the session in protest, Bychowski got out of bed and got dressed to go back out into the lobby where she would rewrite her Sunday morning paper on transgender medieval studies in order to consider the current state of the field in the wake of the Congress.<sup>5</sup> While few people were physically in the room for a Sunday morning session in Kalamazoo, the rewrite would be read and shared online as others reflected on their own experiences of the conference. This would not be the last time the Medieval Congress would serve as a forum for the churning cauldron of perspectives that collided as medieval trans feminisms arose in the field.

Working throughout 2017, the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, which also sponsored a panel on the topic for the 2018 ICMS, formalized a special issue of its journal on trans feminist medieval studies. The vote for the SMFS session was held in a combined business

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5. Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski, "Genres of Embodiment: A Theory of Medieval Transgender Literature," *Things Transform*, 17 May 2016, <http://www.thingstransform.com/2016/05/genres-of-embodiment-theory-of-medieval.html>.

meeting with the Medievalists of Color organization. Together, the overflowing room voted strongly in favor of the session, “Towards a Medieval Transgender Studies,” with such a high percentage that the note taker recorded the number as “basically unanimous.” Some of these scholars’ papers in this session are being published in this special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum*; a significant majority of the presenters were transgender identified. Assisting in the work of increasing the number of transgender scholars at medieval conferences and networking with medievalists, the SMFS’s Trans Travel Grant provided funds to help emerging trans scholars deal with the often prohibitive costs of travel, lodging, and conference expenses. The Trans Travel Grant is funded by online donations as well as “Wear Your Advocacy” buttons, clothing, and tote bags sold by the SMFS and its members. Recipients of the award comment how few other transgender people they get to meet in academia and especially in medieval studies. This grant continues to give these emerging trans scholars not only access, but also community. Monies such as this affirmed that if we want medieval trans feminisms to grow, we must not only support it with thoughts and prayers but also create the material conditions for literal trans bodies to access and transform the field. Such a grant is instrumental in supporting trans scholars attending future medieval conferences, such as the following year’s meetings of ICMS in Kalamazoo and the meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Toronto.

While this critical work paves ways forward for transgender scholars, throughout 2017 various government and anti-LGBT social movements worked to unmake the progress of the previous years. After the Supreme Court confirmed same-sex marriage, anti-queer groups in the United States and abroad increased their targeting of transgender issues. After President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence took office, their administration led the way for a series of rights, programs, and protections to be rolled back for transgender people. This unmaking spanned many aspects of public life. Government agencies stripped protections and guidelines for LGBTQ and transgender youths, placing these younger generations at risk for personal and institutional bullying. Additionally, the administration eroded job and housing protections for trans people as well. Making significant news, the attack on trans rights

also went after the right to engage in military service for transgender individuals; the Pentagon had recently allowed and affirmed this right. These attacks engaged in a series of smear campaigns aimed at painting the trans population as disordered, unfit to serve, and too great of a financial drain. Because the military is the largest single employer of transgender persons in the United States, the Pentagon's reversals and the government's smears constituted a huge blow and source of anxiety for many trans community members. The government's misrepresentations affected transgender lives, even those unlikely to serve and who were critical of the military. All of these political and institutional attacks created a hostile work and living environment for many trans scholars and students. Increasingly, these regular threats to their dignity and livelihoods distracted trans academics at each level from fully engaging in their important work.

Amid these social contexts, the 2018 session, "Towards a Medieval Transgender Studies," sought to set a way forward and to assess dangers and limitations, as well as mark a moment in time. The majority of the panel was composed of trans scholars who work in transgender studies, yet not all were medievalists by trade or training. This spoke to the ways in which medieval studies not only fails to market itself to emerging transgender scholars, but in many ways presents itself as unwelcoming to trans people as well as to other marginalized populations. Understanding this tension and anticipating the trouble it can cause for panelists, Bychowski composed an open letter to the Congress ahead of releasing the panel's proposal and call for papers. In this letter, she called on medieval studies to do better in their real and perceived treatment of transgender persons or topics.<sup>6</sup> In the letter, she recalled instances where prominent transgender studies scholars and activists have responded first with shock and then with chastisement upon hearing that she worked in medieval studies. The image of medieval studies as dominated by conservative Christian white cisgender heterosexual males remains active in the public consciousness, and the field can do

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6. Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski, "Transgender Can Save the Middle Ages: An Open Letter to the International Congress on Medieval Studies," *Things Transform*, 8 May 2017, <http://www.thingstransform.com/2017/05/transgender-can-save-middle-ages-letter.html>.

more to change negative perceptions as well as problematic realities. Anecdotally, Bychowski confirmed from speaking to a number of rising graduate students and early career scholars that young trans scholars are often directed away from medieval studies by their faculty mentors, even more so when these young trans scholars want to study the Middle Ages in the context of trans studies. Variations of the conversation run thus: “you can’t do THAT in medieval studies” or “YOU can’t do that in medieval studies.” The advice is not entirely uninformed (although perhaps misinformed) and not always ill-intentioned. Instead, potential trans scholars are directed towards fields and eras in which being transgender or working on trans topics may find ready reception, such as women’s and gender studies or twentieth-century and contemporary studies. This advice is framed as trying to protect an already precarious young scholar from wading into battles that rattle experienced and better-situated scholars. As a result of the lack of an established trans medieval studies, fears for acceptance and marketability, as well as interests in other fields that arise at the same time that inroads into medieval studies appear blocked, it is not uncommon that the available talent for a panel on medieval transgender studies are those who work primarily or secondarily in other eras or fields. Another notable trend in the panel was how relatively early in their careers the scholars were, with participants including significant representation among current graduate students and independent scholars. As the presentations demonstrated, however, the youth and precariousness of the scholars in no way diminished the sharp insights and contributions towards the field. If anything, this panel embodied the promise of what the nascent field of transgender medieval studies might offer if the scholarship and the scholars receive the necessary support.

This theme of transforming the field to improve resources for trans, non-binary, and intersex scholars continued into official and unofficial business meetings. The 2018 Kalamazoo gathering of the Queerdi-  
evalists, representatives from the extant LGBTQIA organizations for medievalists (such as the Society for the Study of Homosexuality in the Middle Ages, recently renamed Medieval Queer) and some allied organizations (including SMFS, MOC, the Society for the Study of Disability in the Middle Ages, and the Teaching Association for Medieval

Studies [TEAMS]) discussed the results of a poll Bychowski ran prior to the conference, wherein medieval scholars were asked to name and prioritize the most important needs of the queer community at this time. Standing in a bar filled with queer medievalists and allies, one of the first comments was a remark that such a meeting or poll would have been unthinkable not long ago. Indeed, for years it seemed as though the handful of LGBTQIA medieval scholars all knew each other. Yet attendees here regularly ran into people they did not know, testifying to how the community has grown. A variety of ideas were discussed as to how to help the medieval LGBTQIA organizations work better together, how to provide more robust support and mentorship, how to be better advocates, activists, and allies, as well as how to grow the organizations to include and empower a wider diversity of people.

After the cautious optimism and momentum of May 2018, the following months would see pushback against the raised profile of transgender and other marginalized people in the field. This tension came to a head after the 2018 meeting of the New Chaucer Society in Toronto, Canada. This conference boasted another promising number of LGBTQIA scholars and the Queerdievalist organization held a well-attended event in a local queer bookstore and pub. (The poutine was delicious.) The conference hosted a stream of critical and reform-oriented papers tackling issues of sexism, racism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism in the medieval past and in the present medieval studies community. Among these panels was an excellent session on “Chaucer and Transgender Studies,” organized by Ruth Evans. Throughout the conference, there was a sense shared by those looking for better diversity and equity in medieval studies that NCS 2018 was representing and inspiring a lot of cautious optimism for the field. Unfortunately, as email threads following the conference attest, not everyone shared this positivity towards the emerging wave of progress in medieval scholarship.

The backlash found a forum in an email thread set to discuss the 2018 conference and to plan the 2020 conference. The exchange began as a debate around session threads versus free-floating sessions and whether the current format allowed for the optimum range of topics to be discussed. Among conversations about whether certain forms of Chaucer or Gower scholarship have an adequate presence in recent NCS

meetings, a series of comments were made that questioned whether “white, heterosexual western males can still attend” and demanded “that the present complete farce of gender etc. and no Chaucer will not be repeated.” This scholar concluded that NCS 2018 in Toronto “was a major academic catastrophe for the New Chaucer Society,” adding, “I don’t mind supporting and of course respect men who want to wear women’s summer dresses, but I insist that the NCS needs to deal with Chaucer rather than other matters as its central concern, and I would like others with a similar take on these matters to speak out—we might actually need a new New Chaucer Society.”

*Bychowski:* Before continuing, I feel it necessary to step out of the collective “we” of this introduction to note that I do not believe that I or any of the other persons likely being characterized by these comments (misrepresented as “men”) actually wore what would be correctly described as “summer dresses” and would recommend that responses to the prejudice represented by these remarks (and their supporters) include some basic education in fashion as well as primers in gender and human dignity.

*Together:* These remarks are notable not only for their animus against the increased representation in medieval studies among non-white, non-Christian, non-western, non-cisgender, non-heterosexual, and non-male persons in the field. Some New Chaucer Society members supported the comments that indicated that they were disturbed by the prospect of changes in medieval studies. The comments’ seriousness was evident from the scholars who withdrew from NCS in protest of the organization’s increased inclusion of historically underrepresented groups and topics, particularly following the email responses on the thread that condemned the transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny implicit in the trans conference participants’ mischaracterization. Those scholars standing up for their transgender colleagues rejected the description that an increasingly diverse range of scholars and scholarship (a range of diversity that remains woefully limited) was a catastrophe; they also condemned the narrative that white, Christian, western heterosexual men were victims in a field where this demographic continues to dominate both in terms of numbers and influence. This white-male victim narrative repeats rhetoric used throughout 2018 and previously to support white

supremacist and male supremacist attacks against BIPOC, women, immigrants, and the LGBTQIA population. Numerous opponents of the more diverse New Chaucer Society left the NCS with a stated agenda to create their own schism in medieval studies for despondent white, heterosexual western males.

The final months of 2018 saw an increase in personal and governmental attacks on transgender persons with a notable spike in anti-trans policies pushed forward going into the US midterm elections. At the same time, a selection of scholarship about transgender in the Middle Ages was published, including the piece “Were There Transgender People in the Middle Ages?” authored by Bychowski for the *Public Medievalist* website, timed to coincide with election season, which went viral upon its release.<sup>7</sup> Such publications speak to the growing body of scholarship about transgender in the Middle Ages as well as to the political and personal attacks that have arisen in response. As questions of whether there might have been trans people in the premodern past are posed in public forums, transphobic reactionaries release a deluge of slurs, hate-speech, and condemnation. Within the realm of wider non-academic readership, the harassment of authors and publishers clearly demonstrates that public politics cannot be divorced from the complexity and difficulty of being a transgender scholar and working in trans medieval studies. Anti-transgender opponents treat merely being a member of an underrepresented minority in public spaces, schools, public service, and academic spaces long dominated by relative homogeneity as a political statement. This antagonism leads to personal attacks on and harassment of these individuals by those inside and outside their fields.

Additionally, institutional steps to improve clarity and respect for gender diversity at conferences, such as the move among organizers to add a scholar’s pronouns to their conference badges in recent years, has been met by ridicule and backlash. Social media forums for medievalists on Facebook and Twitter boiled with transphobic sentiments when the Medieval Congress announced that they would be joining

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7. M.W. Bychowski, “Were There Transgender People in the Middle Ages?” *The Public Medievalist*, 1 November 2018, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/transgender-middle-ages/>.

the movement to add preferred pronouns to their badges, starting with informal encouragement in 2018 and then moving into a formal part of registration in 2019. Disgruntled comments followed this announcement along with jokes imagining a wide variety of ridiculous and illogical ways that a person could possibly identify on these tags, mocking the very real and reasonable accommodations needed for people who frequently experience misgendering at such conferences. Proponents of the change then responded by offering educational primers as to why the addition of pronoun options is useful and helps create a more welcoming environment.

*Bychowski:* Personally, with medievalists commonly learning multiple languages (many of them no longer in use) and writing extensive articles on the importance of properly using or attributing specific words, there are grounds on which to claim that these backlashes to learning and using proper pronouns stem not from inability but from prejudice. I particularly marvel at the refusal to use “they/them” pronouns for a singular person when medieval scholars know all too well that the English language is very adaptive and slippery, with the example of “you/yours” evolving from a plural term to describing singular persons as well, when “thee/thine” began to go out of use. It is significant that medieval scholars would fight for the correct use of Old English terminology but would scoff at moves to improve the accurate use of modern pronouns, given that those premodern persons who may be subject to misidentification or mistranslation are already dead and thus unaware of our ignorance whereas the misuse of names and pronouns at current medieval conferences may cause harm to our living peers.

*Together:* Nonetheless, within these turbulent conditions, transgender medieval studies and this collection continued to progress. In addition to *Medieval Trans Feminisms* moving into final revisions and publication in 2019, other projects have begun to spin out driven by contributors to this series and allied scholars who likewise want to see medieval studies change for the better. The near future will see the release of collections on trans and genderqueer subjects in medieval hagiography, edited by Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, and what it means to be trans before the word transgender was coined, edited by Greta LaFleur,

Anna Kłosowska, and Masha Raskolnikov.<sup>8</sup> These works demonstrate the great risk and effort being expended by those bodies in the room in order to make medieval studies a place where trans scholars and trans scholarship can grow. Indeed, the growth in recent years could not have occurred without generations of trans scholars who often go undisclosed or under-acknowledged as well as allies who push to make the field a more livable place to work. To all those not seen or shown in this history, we thank you and hope to one day hear your stories.

### 3. Words: Understanding Medieval / Trans / Feminist Discourse

Especially for academic collectivities such as trans feminist medievalists, the literal bodies in the room cannot be extricated from the bodies of work that fill the room and beyond. As such, our intellectual sight now orients us toward the wider range of discourses and movements that have been at work for generations, propelled by trans and non-trans bodies. While the work, sacrifice, and leadership of trans scholars is critical, discourse is necessarily collaborative. The conceptual and cultural genealogies of the words medieval, trans, and feminist intersect as well as diverge at critical junctures. While the scholarship of this collection works to map and navigate these networks, a wider readership may benefit from a brief look at the intellectual bodies of work that bring such a collaboration into being. As such, each concept will be examined in turn for its histories, associations, and critical contributions before we move on to consider the particular spirit of scholarship that constitutes this collection. What do the words “medieval,” “trans,” and “feminist”—formed in our diverse understandings—bring to the table and how might they work together?

#### *Medieval*

“Medieval” was not a word used in the Middle Ages. Nor was the term

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8. *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Blake Gutt and Alicia Spencer-Hall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming); and *Trans Before Trans*, ed. Anna Kłosowska, Masha Raskolnikov, and Greta LaFleur, *New Queer Medievalisms* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, forthcoming).

“Middle Ages,” for that matter. The concept of existing in a middle age or era is not the way that people we call medieval would have understood themselves. Yet Medieval Studies exists! Medieval Studies as a name and a discipline is evidence that we often use terms invented within a later period in order to assist us in understanding earlier periods. There is usefulness in learning what terms people of a certain time and place used to describe themselves, yet this does not take away from the usefulness of terms that they would never have imagined but nonetheless reflect realities about them or their circumstances.

This evident acceptance and usefulness of the word, “medieval,” is important to keep in mind when we consider the addition of the words “transgender” or “trans” to describe people or a field of studies. Neither medieval nor transgender existed as words used by people in fourteenth-century England, yet medieval and transgender describe realities that may exist regardless of whether a person whom they describe possessed the terminology. If a medieval person lived long enough to attend a New Chaucer Society conference, she might look back at her life and describe that period as medieval because it spanned a set of years. Similarly, transgender youths such as Leelah Alcorn and Jazz Jennings describe the moments in which they learned the word transgender.<sup>9</sup> Alcorn reflects how the word makes sense of her past and current state of life. She regards the word as new to her but not the condition it describes. She was transgender before she knew she was transgender. Putting all of these terms together, we can usefully discuss a medieval transgender youth in those terms even as we acknowledge that the medieval trans youth would not have used that terminology. Indeed, the purpose of medieval studies or trans medieval studies is based on the supposition that people with experiences, research, languages, and ideas that arise after the Middle Ages might have some contribution to make about the Middle Ages. Even the most conservative conservationist of us must acknowledge that by even repeating, copying, organizing, or teaching

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9. Leelah Alcorn, “Suicide Note,” Tumblr.com, 28 December 2014, <http://lazerprincess.tumblr.com/post/106447705738/suicide-note>; Jazz Jennings, *Being Jazz: My Life as a (Transgender) Teen* (New York: Random House Teens, 2016), 11.

medieval material, we add something to the texts that was not there originally. Nothing, not even knowledge, can continue to exist without undergoing additions and changes.

Nonetheless, while the words medieval and transgender are modern additions to the conversation about the premodern past, this does not mean that conversation about medieval transgender people is entirely modern. The realities of time, place, gender, and sexuality that we describe through the words “medieval transgender” were discussed by premodern contemporaries through language that modern trans people might not use. Thus, to understand medieval transgender people scholars must (like most medievalists) be polyglots to varying degrees. Just as modern transgender discourse makes room for terminology and identities such as drag, gender queer, genderfuck, non-binary, ftm, mtf, transvestite, cross-dresser, transsexual, trans-, trans\* and trans, transgender medieval studies will need to learn the nuances of eunuchs, castrates, monks, saints, nymphs, fairies, sodomites, virgins, mothers, widows, loathly ladies, and chivalric knights, as well as fabulously performative kings and queens of the non-drag variety. The goal of transgender medieval studies is to, in some ways, qualify a limited field of expertise and in other ways to expand existing fields beyond their current limits. Trans medieval studies works to grow and alter the concept of “medieval” subjects to include transgender just as it works to grow and alter the concept of “transgender” subjects to include the medieval.

### *Trans*

Trans is an adaptive and ever transitioning concept. As such, scholars of medieval studies have found it useful to create primers and language guides as part of their special collections or else give a list of explanations in their introductions.<sup>10</sup> This collection will do similarly. The term “trans” has arisen as a general descriptor of transgender politics because of the prefix’s use across a variety of diagnostic and identifying words used by the community. Magnus Hirschfeld coined the first of the

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10. “Trans & Genderqueer Studies Terminology, Language, and Usage Guide,” *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming 2020).

series, “transvestites,” in his 1910 book that distinguished the diagnostic for trans lives from other contemporary medical language categories, including homosexuality.<sup>11</sup> In addition to numerous modern case studies, Hirschfeld draws on a wide range of historical figures that he believes evidence a longer timeline for the existence of trans identification. This historical survey includes early Christian and medieval figures such as St. Marinos the Monk. Later, the term transsexual was developed.<sup>12</sup> At this point, those who would be called transvestites began to be distinguished from those who would be called transsexuals. This distinction reduced the meaning of transvestite from a general term to being associated more strongly with clothing, marking individuals who transition gender exclusively using clothing, cross-dressing, or by engaging in drag performance. Transsexual began to be used to mark those who pursue medically assisted transitioning technologies such as hormones and surgery. In time, transsexual overturned transvestite as the general umbrella term for the community. This lasted until the 1990s when the term “transgender” was introduced by trans activists who desired a name that was not founded or rooted in medical diagnosis.<sup>13</sup> Over time, transgender overtook transsexual as the ruling umbrella terminology. Yet some retain the use of transsexual for those who pursue medically assisted transitions, reserving transgender for those who do not medically transition, and eschewing the word transvestite for those who cross-dress but do not identify with the trans community. With this evolving and competing array of terminology, often reflecting a lack of consensus among those who identify with the terms, “trans” has emerged as an umbrella descriptor. The advantage of “trans” as a word is that it can and could mean any or all of the other terminology: transvestite, transsexual, and transgender. Some have adopted the use of the asterisk, i.e., “trans,\*” in order to signify this composite of the terminology but use of the asterisk is not highly prevalent as of 2019.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, trans has come

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11. Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Transvestiten: Ein Untersuchung über den erotischen Verkleidungstrieb* (Berlin: Medicinischer Verlag, 1910).

12. Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, “Introduction,” *TQS: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (May 2014): 1-18, 3, doi:10.1215/23289252-2398549.

13. Stryker and Currah, 5-7.

14. Avery Tompkins, “Asterisk,” *TQS: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2

to be used within academic theoretical discourse in a manner similar to the use of the word “queer.” Trans can and is used to describe things as well as people, such as art, literature, history, technology, medicine, and other objects associated with trans people. Again following in the path of the word queer, trans has also been used as a verb. What it means to “trans” something is still up for debate, just as what it means to “queer” something is also open to ongoing discussion.

As an academic working in trans medieval studies, it can be difficult to find scholarship or even panels at medieval conferences since “trans” is an often-used prefix within studies of the Middle Ages. A keyword search in databases or conference schedules will turn up results on translation, transcription, transposition, transportation, transmission, transcendence, transfiguration, and transnationalism, among others. Beyond being an inconvenience and disappointment for trans scholars who get initially excited by the number of results from a keyword and then let down once they begin reading through them, the widespread use of the prefix “trans” has made it easier in some ways and more difficult in other ways for medieval studies to adopt critical trans discourses. Associations with other terms already in use with the prefix trans seems to color the way many scholars view trans identities. For instance, many regard trans people as being so much like transportation that trans-ness is understood as moving from a male community into a female community or from a female into a male community, reinforcing binary perspectives on gender in general and transgender specifically. Others may be so familiar with trans meaning “across” or “between” that trans identity is synonymous with non-binary or gender queer persons. Furthermore, those who consider trans alongside ideas of transcendence may treat trans-ness as signaling a person who is beyond gender or without categorizable gender. Yet again, scholars familiar with transcription and translation may be drawn into focusing on trans identity primarily as an artificial product of technology that changes the form of a body as one changes the form of a text. Each of these associations with words that use the trans prefix may limit or affect how people understand the nuanced critical uses of trans as it relates to trans studies.

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(May 2014): 26-27, doi:10.1215/23289252-2399497.

## *Feminist*

As the opening of this introduction explores, feminism can be intricately bound up in the life of the trans community so long as it is sustained by love. Yet infamous traditions and persons calling themselves feminist have historically been highly prejudiced against trans people as well as any notion of a critical trans feminism. The foundation of trans studies is often established at the publication of Sandy Stone's 1992 essay, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," which by its name and thesis was a response to anti-trans feminist writings such as *The Transsexual Empire*.<sup>15</sup> As such, a reductive reading of the fields might illustrate trans studies as a sort of schism or split on the timeline of feminism. Yet Stone's "Posttranssexual Manifesto" did not surrender the label feminist to those who excluded or derided trans lives. Rather, the movement identified with Stone's manifesto would position itself as a reformation and continuation of feminist discourse. Nonetheless, Stone's essay marks trans studies as a tension or dialectic in feminist discourse, and inversely it marks competing feminisms as a tension and dialectic in trans discourse.

Ironically, transgender need not be named as such to be considered a point of tension for feminism. As Julia Serano unpacks the term in her book, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, attacks on trans women by feminist-identified people is not always overtly an attack about trans-ness.<sup>16</sup> In fact, trans women find themselves in the crossfire of a dialectical argument between feminists and femininity. The waves of animosity in feminism that arise in the 1970s, the 1990s, and the 2010s reflect flashpoints where not only transness but feminine gender were being marked as signs of retrogressive sexism. The 1970s saw a push to leave the model of femininity behind, framing it as a trap and shackles created by the patriarchy to keep women docile. The 1990s saw a critique of femininity as a socially constructed performance, which may be undermined or mocked by fashions such as drag but must not be taken seriously. The 2010s see a wave of feminism

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15. Sandy Stone, "The *Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*," *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2 (1992): 150-76, doi:1215/02705346-10-2\_29-150.

16. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

aimed at creating a world without gender, masculinity, or femininity. In each wave of anti-feminine and anti-gender feminism, trans-ness and trans women in particular have been scapegoated as embodying the trap of misogyny (1970s), the artifice of fakery (1990s), and the persistent essentialism of gender (2010s). It is little surprise then that these anti-feminine, anti-gender strains of feminism present transgender as a tool or a weapon of the patriarchy, because these forms of feminism are themselves using transgender as a tool and a weapon against systems of femininity and gender. Trans lives, rights, and histories get torn down in the process by these forms of feminism, but this destruction is a byproduct not the goal. As ever, transgender bodies and concepts are caught in the crossfire in a war between cisgender camps. The fact that anti-transgender rhetoric is a method rather than a goal for these forms of feminism is evidenced by the fact that many (if not most) of these forms of feminism deny that transgender is anything other than a lie created by cisgender people. For these anti-transgender waves of feminism, the trans-ness is seen only as a tool or smoke screen for cisgender traps, fantasies, or essentialism. Trans lives are treated as blank bodies onto which cisgender fears, frustrations, and anxieties around gender are projected.

Though in this introduction we have addressed the ways that transmisogyny and white supremacy intersect, the most recent anti-trans actions from TERF academics in the UK only further highlights these connections. In June 2019, British “feminist” academics attacked UK universities’ connections to Stonewall, an LGBTQIA non-profit organization with a piece in the *Times*. They did this under the guise of “academic freedom” in relation to Stonewall’s affirmative position on transgender rights and inclusive pedagogy.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the history of British feminism and its ongoing transmisogyny is well-documented, including the stance of Germain Greer.<sup>18</sup> But this also points to a

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17. Nick Duffy, “After 30 academics sign letter opposing trans rights, 3600 sign letter in support,” *Pink News*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/06/18/after-30-academics-sign-letter-opposing-trans-rights-3600-sign-letter-in-support/?fbclid=IwARiPL77N4eD6PTZOt3obRv4RaV7PtMcdLx8tMQjB9kdSEz93Z6TVMLt6RHQ>.

18. Calla Wahlquist, “Germain Greer tells Q&A her trans views were wrong, but

history that has not addressed violent colonialism nor the 40+ years of work in critical race theory and gender theory done by many BIWOC in North America.<sup>19</sup> Finally, among researchers of the far right currently, TERFs have become another entry point into white supremacy.<sup>20</sup> These violent transmisogynist ideologies become an entry point for white supremacist radicalization and also marshalled into violent anti-trans policies that align with the agenda of the far right. Thus, we believe it is particularly important that this special issue is published in a transatlantic journal—*Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*. These politics are enmeshed in current academic discussion and politics in gender studies.

In the introduction to the *TSQ* special issue on Trans/Feminisms, Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher acknowledge the waves of transphobic animus from self-identified “feminists” directed against the trans community through the 1970s, the rise of queer and trans academic discourse in the 1990s, and recently in the 2010s with the development of legal and social protections for transgender people.<sup>21</sup> Despite the animosity and misinformation spread by individuals under the label of feminism, Stryker and Bettcher sought to respond by reorienting rather than rejecting feminism as part of trans politics:

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then restates them,” *Guardian*, 11 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/12/germaine-greer-tells-qa-her-trans-views-were-wrong-but-then-restates-them>.

19. Sophie Lewis, “How British Feminism Became Anti-Trans,” *New York Times*, 7 February 2019, [https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html?fbclid=IwARiUkGc2r\\_a\\_KAd37f3cb7kDERkg8dpE\\_L6kFIQYPP4qv8KetUfO9L7FjxU](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html?fbclid=IwARiUkGc2r_a_KAd37f3cb7kDERkg8dpE_L6kFIQYPP4qv8KetUfO9L7FjxU).

20. Emily G @EmilyGorcenski, “A lot of people have asked this, so here is the answer:” 23 January 2019, [https://jezebel.com/the-unholy-alliance-of-trans-exclusionary-radical-femin-1834120309?utm\\_medium=sharefromsite&utm\\_source=jezebel\\_facebook&utm\\_campaign=sharebar&fbclid=IwAR1womlhvwC3-br11qIXEzPuhEc3OvLsZVIVvt5Gsn3\\_FR1BYB64XMS2cIs&%2Fsetsession](https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1088180524504571908.html?fbclid=IwAR35orijcmg_NjiMxX-UVKk-Ou1Bl1MuOMVYQBp3bPRPbDqKaz8P5qVnrMw; Esther Wang, “The Unholy Alliance of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists and the Right Wing,” <i>Jezebel</i>, 9 May 2019, <a href=).

21. Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, “Introduction: Trans/Feminisms,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1-2 (2016): 5-14, doi:10.23289252-3334127.

Rather than cede the label feminist to a minority of feminists who hold a particular set of negative opinions about trans people, and rather than reducing all transgender engagement with feminism to the strategy embraced by some trans people of vigorously challenging certain forms of antitransgender feminist speech, we should instead demonstrate the range and complexity of trans/feminist relationships.<sup>22</sup>

Following in the trajectory set by *TSQ*'s "Trans/Feminisms," this collection, "Medieval Trans Feminism," likewise seeks to explore a more complex relationship that acknowledges the strains of antipathy among some feminists towards transgender lives and also seeks to engage older and more dynamic histories of feminist approaches to trans discourse. Feminist exclusions of trans lives is not the oldest, original form of the movement when considered with a historical scope beyond modernity. Nor is the exclusion of trans lives from feminist community and discourse a purely modern response to the rising social status of transgender identities. The "range and complexity" that *TSQ* recognizes among modern feminisms in fact have cultural genealogies that stretch back into medieval traditions of thought.

Trans feminism is a recently coined term but describes an approach to feminism and sexism that exists concurrently with previous waves of anti-trans forms of feminism. As Stryker and Bettcher note, anti-trans forms of feminism may have only ever truthfully described a minority, however loudly and destructively that minority may broadcast itself. Even amid the waves of anti-trans sentiment among some feminist scholars, there has been significant support and attention given by other feminist scholars towards the development of transgender studies. In medieval studies we see how feminists in medieval studies and medievalists in gender studies repeat language and ideas that undermine trans identity even while producing scholarship that would be critical to an emerging trans medieval studies. For instance, in the 1990s, we see gender performativity, drag, and the deconstruction of sex at once introducing medieval trans figures while framing them as tools and victims of

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22. Stryker and Bettcher, 7.

cisgender sexual tensions. Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd used outdated language and concepts of cross-dressing and transvestism in their essay on Eleanor Rykener, a medieval trans sex worker.<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw likewise approaches Rykener through a queer performative lens, also repeating the language of transvestite and emphasizing sodomy as a key concern that expresses itself as an anxiety with Rykener's gender. Despite bearing the markers of current feminist debates around gender, these medievalists nonetheless elevate a premodern trans feminine figure into professional consciousness. Thus, even as emerging trans-affirming feminist scholarship in medieval studies challenges these essays (including an essay co-authored by Karras revisiting and disagreeing with portions of her 1990s essay) these works of feminist medievalists provide critical points of departure.<sup>24</sup>

This special issue does the work laid out in Gabrielle M.W. Bychowski's article, "The Necropolitics of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages," which examines John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and its Tale of Narcissus to

call for a trans feminist turn to the study of medieval literature, insisting that a variety of trans genres of embodiment existed in the premodern past. This intervention into medieval and transgender literature constitutes a relatively new movement and intersection in both fields, striving to articulate and invite others to articulate what a medieval trans literary theory might look like and do. Most trans literary theory has yet to be written. Much medieval history and literature yet to be reconsidered in the light of an emerging Transgender Studies.

As part of that work, this collection of contributions to trans feminist

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23. Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, "'Ut cum muliere': A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (London: Routledge, 1996), 99-116.

24. Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited," *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*, ed. Laine E. Dogget and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, Gallica 39 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2016), <https://www-jstor-org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt18gzf9k.1>.

medieval studies aims to represent and collect several of these threads of feminism that cross and contest with one another in ways that generate a greater range and complexity in how we approach gender, sexuality, politics, society, history, theology, literature, and more. This interweaving of feminisms is a precarious work that is sustained (despite tensions that threaten to rip it apart) by a love that gifts connections and generations without set limits on what that love may birth.

#### 4. Spirits: Specters of Fields Past, Present and Future

*Bychowski:* I drop out of the collective “we” to root the reflection on spirit in experience. This collection began with a meditation on trans feminist medieval studies as a thing like a hormone pill in the palm of our hands. I remember when I held my first estrogen pill. For me, there was something spiritual about the pill on numerous levels. As the pill induced hormone levels that my body struggles/d to produce itself, it was like holding an external prosthetic ovary, an ovary my body anticipated but never produced on its own. A part of my body would now come in pill form. The affecting power of the pill is whole body, as the lengthy side effects testify. Estrogen does not just affect one or a few parts of the body. Estrogen—like all hormones—is trans-systematic. The pill recalibrates the whole network. In this way, the pill acts like a spirit in the flesh, advocating for transfigurations in the body, mediating between tensions in mind and body, speaking in manifold tongues to diverse organs like fire through the blood, and inciting dysphoria and euphoria. This pill and its communion connects me as well to a diverse ecology of animals, vegetables, machines, and minerals that existed long before me and will exist long after me. As the body is one glory made up of a thousand tiny glories, so too is my experience one of another thousand.

*Together:* We can imagine trans feminist medieval studies in much the same spirit. This thing may be as small as a hormone pill yet it can have great effects: advocating, transfiguring, mediating, and speaking in diverse languages. Trans feminisms in medieval studies is a trans-systemic assemblage of medieval studies, trans studies, feminist studies, critical race studies all working all working towards an understanding wherein each depends upon the other. Together we work with a shared

spirit that strives to rethink bodies of scholarship, history, religion, and literature. The spirit works in these bodies as humoral arts and sciences imagined life as an assemblage of spirits flowing through nodes of the body, taking the form of contested blood, beautiful black bile, corrosive white phlegm, and resisting yellow bile. This humoral ecology that runs through medieval studies at once offers lifeblood and toxicity to trans feminism. The thing as small as a hormone pill comes with many pages of side effects and warnings. The scholars of this collection know the anxiety, dangers, and hurt that can arise from affirming medieval genealogies for trans scholarship. In turn, feminism has been at times the beating heart and at other times the heart attack that propels trans studies forward or else threatens to shut it down. Among them all, trans studies promises to bring affirmation as well as transformation to existing medieval and feminist studies. The spirit of trans feminist medieval studies is thus a thing of diverse plateaus, trajectories, intensities, durations, and assemblages. Each entry in this collection may at once be considered an end-in-itself, a fruit of what trans feminism in medieval studies can produce. Yet each fruit also bears a seed for future scholarship that continues and mutates long-lived intellectual and cultural genealogies. Each body of work is thus a glory made up of a thousand tiny glories so that there may be another thousand and more.

Manifesting this spirit across many tongues, these articles tell a many-voiced story of the past, represent the present state of the field, and speak to what the future of the field may be. Yet in a society that divides and destroys trans bodies and ideas, the critical trans animus is not exempt from abuse. Our spirits are torn to tatters by a world that seeks to snuff out our tiny glories. In these circumstances, the struggle to keep these embers alive is desperate work, with faint glows being the result of great effort to survive. As ever, the spirit of trans feminist medievalists is precarious and precious.

*Kim:* In a recent Twitter thread and article, Julia Serano—a transgender writer, performer, speaker, and activist—put out a PSA: “we are now living through the biggest anti-#trans backlash since the 1970s. it’s been going on since at least 2016. It’s not just Republicans or evangelicals—it’s

coming from numerous fronts. & most cis people seem oblivious to it”<sup>25</sup> The introduction to *Trap Door* explains: “We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence.”<sup>26</sup> As deadly violence against the transgender community continues to rise in 2019<sup>27</sup>—a violence that is often intertwined with the issues around #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName and the importance of understanding Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s framing of intersectionality and compounded harm<sup>28</sup>—the lives of transgender people now and transgender people in the past matter. As Che Gossett has explained,

Black trans lives matter, and for Black trans women in particular, the struggle for life in all its capaciousness is a struggle against ongoing premature death. With the 2015 killing of Kiesha Jenkins in Philadelphia, we are again reminded of the vicious violence against Black trans lives and the urgency of Black trans lives mattering as a matter for all Black lives.<sup>29</sup>

The US government continues to enact forms of state-sanctioned violence, in the policies of Betsy DeVos who has deliberately harmed

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25. Julia Serano (@JuliaSerano), tweet, 26 April 2019, 4:21 pm, <https://twitter.com/JuliaSerano/status/1121871834201243648>. See also her entire set of posts on Threader: Julia Serano (@JuliaSerano), thread, 26 April 2019, <https://threader.app/thread/1121871834201243648>. See also, Julia Serano, “Rethinking LGBTQIA+Visibility,” *Medium*, 11 June 2019, <https://medium.com/@juliaserano/rethinking-lgbtq-visibility-69e39f36731>.

26. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door*,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), xv–xxvi, at xv.

27. Jen Christensen, “Killings of Transgender People in the US Saw Another High Year,” *CNN*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/16/health/transgender-deaths-2018/index.html>.

28. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; available online at <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>, accessed 2 May 2019.

29. Che Gossett, “Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility,” in Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton *Trap Door*, 183–90, at 183.

transgender students and taken away their rights,<sup>30</sup> in the Trump administration's transgender military ban,<sup>31</sup> the banning of transgender couples in adoptions in South Carolina,<sup>32</sup> the violent prison policies of housing transgender people only in prisons aligned to biological sex,<sup>33</sup> the asylum crisis that the Trump administration has created that disproportionately harms transgender people from obtaining asylum,<sup>34</sup> and the Trump administration's assault on transgender healthcare protections.<sup>35</sup> The numerous small and large attacks on transgender lives, transgender rights, and transgender narratives have become the everyday violence enacted in our politics and culture now. In this way, though the seeds of this special issue began in 2016 at an MLA session sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship by myself and M. W. Bychowski, what began in the midst of the so-called "trans tipping point"<sup>36</sup> has reached publication at a time of a systematic backlash and attack against trans bodies.

These issues are national to the US but also specific to the scholars who have organized and edited this issue. Along with the attacks on transgender lives, rights, and narratives, the rise of the far right has

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30. Mark Pocan, "Betsy DeVos Denies Trans Students Basic Rights," *ACLU*, 3 April 2018, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/lgbt-rights/lgbt-youth/betsy-devos-denies-trans-students-basic-rights>.

31. Dominic Holden, "Trump Got What He Wanted — Transgender Soldiers Are Now Banned From The Military," *Buzzfeed News*, 12 April 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/dominicholden/trump-trans-military-ban-takes-effect>.

32. "The Discrimination Administration," *National Center for Transgender Equality*, <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>, accessed 2 May 2019.

33. "The Discrimination Administration."

34. Adolfo Flores, "A Transgender Woman Who Sought Asylum in the US Was Deported and Killed in El Salvador," *BuzzFeed News*, 21 February 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/transgender-migrant-killed-asylum-el-salvador>.

35. Jessica Ravitz, "Trump Administration May Soon Remove Transgender Health Care Protections," *CNN*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/25/health/hhs-transgender-protections-bn/index.html?no-st=1556598698>.

36. Melissa Gira Grant, "After the Transgender Tipping Point," *Pacific Standard*, 3 May 2017, <https://psmag.com/news/after-the-transgender-tipping-point>. See also Serano, "Rethinking L.G.B.T.Q.+Visibility."

meant the targeting of medieval studies scholars by Milo Yiannopoulos—the catalyst and chief white terrorist in regards to #GamerGate<sup>37</sup> and a consistent harasser and doxxer of transgender folks.<sup>38</sup> In this way, though this issue specifically addresses the medieval past, the crosshairs of white supremacy, the far right, violent transmisogyny, and white supremacist terrorism means that to organize, write, and publish this issue comes with the potential for real stochastic violence to some of the scholars and editors of this issue.<sup>39</sup> Our scholarship is in the crosshairs of contemporary politics in which the expectation of death and rape threats are the de facto standard operating procedure of speaking and writing scholarship about a medieval past that upends the vision of a white, cisgender, heteronormative European utopia.<sup>40</sup>

This special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* is also an issue that centers the questions around what it means to center transgender scholars, transgender archives, and transgender lives. Medieval studies, as far as we know, until now has shut out transgender bodies from its scholarly spaces. In this way, this is the first scholarly narrative that frames what transgender scholarship means for the Middle Ages. Along with this, we want to grapple with the issue of the archive and what that means in thinking about both the past and the future. Finally, transgender studies as a category of analysis is not an abstraction but about a politics that simultaneously has affected bodies in the past as well as bodies now and in the future. This is not a theoretical lens without situated, intersectional politics. This is not a theoretical lens that is not activist, self-reflective, and also critical about its own

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37. Torill Elvira Mortensen, “Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate,” *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (2016): 787–806, doi:10.1177/1555412016640408.

38. Brittney McNamara, “Milo Yiannopoulos Harassed a Transgender Student at Her School,” *Teen Vogue*, 16 December 2016, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/milo-yiannopoulos-harassed-a-transgender-student-at-her-school>.

39. Jonathon Keats, “Jargon Watch: The Rising Danger of Stochastic Terrorism,” *Wired*, 21 January 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/jargon-watch-rising-danger-stochastic-terrorism>.

40. Dorothy Kim, “Medieval Studies Since Charlottesville,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 30 August 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/08/30/scholar-describes-being-conditionally-accepted-medieval-studies-opinion>.

absences to its core. And as I have explained, this is not a theoretical lens that does not have a body count in the past, now, and in the future.

In this way, as a cisgender, heteronormative, Asian woman in medieval studies, though I intersect along the lines of race and gender, I do not identify as queer, transgender, or non-binary. Thus, I do not believe it is my place to organize a special issue on transgender studies without transgender scholars. I do not think it is my place to edit a special issue on medieval trans feminisms without it being a deep project of collaboration with a transgender medievalist. My role as a scholarly ally and activist is to give away my power, whatever that might be (and in this case, my long history as Secretary for SMFS and as the liaison who ran MLA sessions) to center the voices of transgender scholars and transgender scholarship.

Thus, the point of organizing a trans medieval feminisms session with M. W. Bychowski was to center her scholarship as well as the scholarship of other transgender voices and those who wanted to begin to delve into the medieval transgender archive. Because there are no transgender scholars in medieval studies currently in permanent positions globally, the point of this issue is to center the voices of this new, and yet longstanding, scholarly avenue, while getting out of the way so that these scholars can create the field. I am grateful to the web of senior feminist and queer scholars who have helped peer review these articles with thoughtful comments specifically to help improve the quality of each essay. Along with regular anonymous peer review, Bychowski and I reviewed each article and gave writers specific bibliography vis-à-vis transgender studies for revision. In this way, the work the authors have done in this issue has required multiple revisions and ongoing work to address not just the critical tradition in scholarship but also the transgender studies one.

I follow the work done by black feminist and queer scholars, particularly Moya Bailey in “#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics,” who has discussed the importance of co-creatorship and collaboration in an intersectional feminist ethics of research.<sup>41</sup> Bychowski and

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41. Moya Bailey, “#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research: An

I spent time finding, curating, and editing these articles to make sure that they attended not only to scholarly discussions in medieval studies and material archives but also to the longer discussion happening in the field of transgender studies. My own intellectual autoethnography in transgender studies has been entirely because of the generosity and fellowship of Max Strassfeld (University of Arizona) and Benjamin Baader (University of Manitoba) who organized a reading group at the University of Michigan Frankel Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies in 2013-2014 for whoever in our fellows group (the topic that year was “Gender and Jewish Life”) wished to read together on feminist queer materialism and transgender studies. This issue is then a way to pay that generosity, fellowship, and transgender community forward to new scholars. Bychowski has asked me to give a little autoethnography in order to situate this special issue with not just the scholarly but also the political and personal praxis that is part of the intersectional ethics of social justice central to this issue. As I have explained to her, the point of allyship and activism to my transgender colleagues is to do the labor so that their work can be highlighted and centered.

*Together:* The current issue is organized in chronological order. It begins with an art historical examination of Anglo-Saxon iconography in Stephanie McGucken’s “Vice & Virtue As Woman?: The Iconography of Gender Identity in the Late Anglo-Saxon *Psychomachia* Illustrations,” which considers how Anglo-Saxon artists could “destabilize” gender as a way to interrogate the category of righteousness. Coral Lumbley’s “*Imperatrix, Domina, Rex: Conceptualizing the Female King in Twelfth-Century England*” reexamines the historiography and the material culture of the twelfth-century Queen of England, Matilda. She discusses the *Gesta Stephani*, in which the chronicle shifts her gender within a transgender spectrum and also examines Matilda’s royal seal “as a culturally weighted, gendered prosthetic.” Meghan Nestel’s “A Space of Her Own: Genderfluidity and Negotiation in *The Life of Christina of Markyate*” takes up Christina of Markyate’s twelfth-century gender fluidity by intersecting the work of Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, and

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Autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2015), open access at <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq>.

Karen Barad. Caitlin G. Watt's "Car vallés sui et nient mescine": Trans Heroism and Literary Masculinity in *Le Roman de Silence*" argues that Silence is a "transmasculine subject." Thus, Silence is "a trans man, rather than a cross-dressing woman." Blake Gutt's article, "Medieval Trans Lives in Anamorphosis: Looking Back and Seeing Differently (Pregnant Men and Backward Birth)," pushes back against the discussion of sodomy in medieval studies to consider two thirteenth-century French texts, *Aucassin et Nicolette* and *Le Roman de Saint Fanuel*. He takes the Lacanian discussion of anamorphosis ("to look back and see differently") to examine Katherine Bond Stockton's formulation of the queer child in relation to transgender male pregnancies. M. W. Bychowski's article, "The Necropolitics of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages," examines John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and its Tale of Narcissus. Gower's work becomes a way to see how the genre of confession could "resist these structures of gender." Kadin Henningsen's piece, "Calling [herself] Eleanor: Gender Labor and Becoming a Woman in the Rykener Case," reexamines Eleanor Rykener's legal case in late fourteenth-century London to show her as a transgender woman vis-à-vis her gendered labor in the "series" of woman. The issue concludes with the collaborative work of Joy Ellison and Nicholas Hoffman in their "The Afterward: Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in the Medieval Imaginary." Their article is a coda that concentrates "on the legacies of two formative activists in American LGBT history" in order to center "a praxis—a way of conceptualizing and engaging with medievalism that centers trans women of color and ultimately offers a way of radically rethinking what we mean by 'medievalism' in the first place."

*Kim*: The critical stakes of this issue are in conversation with what has been discussed by other recent transgender studies collections. Weighing the seriousness of this work, Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton make an important point in their introduction to *Trap Door*: "Many of the essays, conversations, and dossiers gathered in *Trap Door* attempt to think through this fundamental paradox, attending to implications for the political present and the art historical past, particularly

with regard to persisting—if incomplete—legacies of representation.”<sup>42</sup> Likewise, as they explain, this issue also must grapple with:

Being mindful of how representation can be and is used to restrict the possibilities of trans people flourishing in hostile worlds, we persist. This anthology takes seriously the fact that representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible.<sup>43</sup>

This contradiction, this friction, this door/threshold that becomes a trap is also something we are keenly aware of in this volume. This volume is about the medieval archive and the (im)possibility of transgender bodies in this premodern archive. The medieval archive is also the state archive and thus, as the work of critical archive studies explains:

[has] been historically conjured and implemented for the purposes of social and resource management and control; among their more condemnable uses have been the management of colonial resources, of which human labor was often considered integral. Only in retrospect, as state archives take on new life as “historical archives,” have their uses been imaginable by archivists, historians, activists, and others as possible for a different kind of public good in the community’s interest.<sup>44</sup>

If we agree with Mel Chen’s point that “archives are not merely about the past, but also about becoming,”<sup>45</sup> then it is also about the archive’s potential. Chen further points out that “categories remain ghosts, hinting at certain contained pasts, presents, and futures, while being absolutely unfaithful to any of these historical imaginaries.”<sup>46</sup> We are interested in how this archive can unmoor itself from its rigid state location, from its

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42. Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton, “Known Unknowns,” xvi.

43. Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton, xviii.

44. Mel Y. Chen, “Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet,” in Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*, 147–59, at 150.

45. Chen, 153.

46. Chen, 154.

categories of white supremacist, colonial empire, and cisgender binary heteronormativity. Or if it cannot, can we transform it into another space? Is the transgender historical archive always in a state of becoming?

It is from the work of Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts” that we believe we as scholars and readers must address some inescapable truths about working with this medieval archive.<sup>47</sup> We hope that it also allows us to address what is keenly missing from this special issue. Along with shutting out transgender scholars, medieval studies has also consistently shut out scholars who are black, indigenous, and people of color. This has meant that, as far as we know, there has never been an academic transgender medievalist of color. Other than myself as a woman of color editing this special issue collaboratively, there is no single piece of transgender scholarship written (other than this introduction) by a medievalist scholar of color. However, it is from the work of black and intersectional feminists and queer scholars in particular that we have taken much of this current interrogation about working with the transgender medieval archive. Hartman explains that “The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”<sup>48</sup> She further addresses the impossibility and the ethical cruxes explicit in the histories of the slavery archive by asking the following:

Put differently, how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom? . . .

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from “the locus of impossible speech” or resurrect lives from the ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to “exhume buried cries” and reanimate the dead?<sup>49</sup>

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47. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1-14.

48. Hartman, 2.

49. Hartman, 3.

Hartman's questions are questions that the medieval transgender archive must address both because it must think about the issues of race—an intersectionality that is absent in this iteration and archival “becoming” but also because we must read the medieval transgender archive through the lens of its first transgender medieval scholars: Martha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.

Thus, we take Hartman's point of what she calls the praxis of “critical fabulation” as a way to be faithful to the transgender activist, critical, and scholarly practices that have been so central to transgender communities. As she writes:

The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. “Fabula” denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. . . . By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. . . . By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl's story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.<sup>50</sup>

We ask the reader to follow our historiographic critical fabulation, to understand the method of the “recombinant narrative” that must embed “present, past, and future” in order to give space to the premodern story of transgender lives. Following Hartman, we believe that: “The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* . . . but rather to imagine what cannot be verified. . . . It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which

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50. Hartman, 11–12.

resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.”<sup>51</sup>

To read this special issue on trans feminism in medieval studies straight and linearly seems rather against the intent, praxis, and hopes of this volume.<sup>52</sup> Instead, we would like to suggest that reading and reorienting transgender scholarship in medieval studies from the end, with Ellison and Hoffman’s article on Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, would actually recenter the work of the first transgender medieval scholars. If medieval studies has shut out transgender scholars, then the only way to follow the scholarly work of transgender medieval studies by transgender scholars is to center this genealogy. If medieval studies has also shut out black, indigenous, and people of color scholars, the work of adaptation, creative and critical scholarly work becomes the alternative genealogy of how transgender communities and transgender scholarship has been done in relation to the medieval past. In this way, a temporal transgender turn would ask us to situate their lives, their scholarly/creative/critical praxis with the medieval past as the foundational lens of medieval transgender scholarly history.

We are rearranging the critical narrative, we are asking for a reading that takes seriously transgender critical, creative, and scholarly praxes that have happened on the streets of cities (whether New York or medieval London); in the threshold spaces of fabliaux, romance, or drag troupe performances; in the visual and visibility of art and acts of performance art; in the votive altars of medieval saints in transgender activist communities and in transgender hagiographies.

Our visions of trans feminism in medieval studies—bodily, intellectual, and spiritual— have shown us that there is much left to do; there are more transgender lives to acknowledge and support, more

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51. Hartman, 12.

52. This traditional focus on “unidirectionality, control, and legitimization,” through “straight directionality” has been offered as a critique of philological methodology. See Roberta Magnani and Diane Watt, “Towards a Queer Philology,” *post-medieval* 9, no. 3 (2018): 252–68, at 253. Their argument is informed by Sara Ahmed’s discussion of “directional metaphors” in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

transgender politics to fight for, and more transgender activist work to do. There are so many bodies missing from the premodern archive as well as missing in the field of medieval studies. This is what we believe the medieval transgender turn must address in the past, now, and in the future.

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