

THINKING WITH TRANS MALADJUSTMENT

The Terrible We

Cameron Awkward-Rich

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ASTERISK: Gender, Trans-, and All That Comes After
A series edited by Susan Stryker, Eliza Steinbock, and Jian Neo Chen

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CAMERON AWKWARD-RICH

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PREFACE/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began thinking in earnest about what would become *The Terrible We* in 2014, a year that was shot through with Obama-era optimism, condensed in the much-discussed *Time* cover story that declared that we had, as a country, arrived at the transgender tipping point. Indeed, 2014 also marked the inauguration of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, the notorious trans studies cluster hire at the University of Arizona, and the one-year anniversary of the *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, which together formed a decisive tipping point for the field of trans studies.¹ It's crucial to remember, then, that when the essays that make up this book were conceived there was not yet a journal of record, regular conferences, or more than a small handful of tenured/tenure-track faculty who worked primarily in the field. At the same time, it was not true to say that trans studies had not yet begun; indeed, announcements of its beginning have occurred iteratively since the 1990s. What happened in 2014 and after, rather, was the beginning of the field's more robust institutionalization in the US university.

As a graduate student in 2014, then, I felt caught between the profound and varied optimisms that circulated with *trans* as a political and intellectual horizon and the recalcitrant distress that marked the lives/writing of those people who constitute trans pasts and presents. It seemed to me that the version of *trans* that was on the precipice of inclusion—of having an official, institutional life—was one that simply could not accommodate the cognitive/affective divergences, black moods, and peculiar itineraries endemic to what I understood as trans life and thought. Further, the mainstream optimism of 2014 was discordant with what I understood about the way *trans* has, historically, cycled through moments of visibility and repression, possibility and foreclosure. Put another way, I did not believe that those optimistic conditions would prove durable, nor that trans studies as it was being constituted offered me tools for living and thinking with all that persisted, persistently, in optimism's wake. In fact, it seemed to me then—and still seems to me now—that the “disciplinary position” of trans studies as institutionalized in, alongside, and against women's/feminist studies and queer theory, and the

concurrent incorporation of trans people into the disciplinary imaginary of neoliberal citizenship, actually intensified, rather than alleviated, the maddening experience of living in what Talia Bettcher calls, aptly, “the WTF.”² *The Terrible We*, then, is a book-length inquiry into the “bad”—pathologized, painful, or politically impairing—trans feelings and habits of mind that linger on in (and threaten to undo) trans people’s and trans studies’ relatively newfound legibility. In particular, the book is interested in what one might learn by thinking with, rather than against, the mad and dismal images of trans life that had to be disavowed in order for *trans* to emerge as a name for a species of rational man who could be the subject, not merely the object, of academic inquiry.

Much has happened since 2014: the Trump administration demonstrated the ease of undoing many Obama-era causes for optimism; trans-exclusionary “feminisms” have resurged in the United Kingdom and the United States and have been shaping conversations about transness (and, notably, trans-masculinity) in a variety of domains—cultural, legal, and academic; queer theorists of a certain kind have repeatedly and publicly waged generational and/or theoretical conflicts on the backs of their trans students; and on and on. At the same time, trans studies, trans literature, and trans thought have (thankfully, luckily, with much effort) expanded far beyond the terms of the formative, ongoing conflicts that *The Terrible We* traces, such that this book might be understood to be speaking to and from a different time. In a real sense, it is. I am.

Indeed, at *this* time, I can’t help but worry that this book takes too seriously trans-antagonistic forms of thought that I should have, instead, simply ignored. But like so many trans scholars who came to trans studies in a place “before trans studies,” I had to write the book in order to learn that, next time, I could.³ Further, on this side of 2020–21 in the United States—on this side of the coining of “gender critical feminism” and “rapid-onset gender dysphoria,” the conservative desire and legal campaign to define “transgender . . . out of existence;” the killing of (mad/black/trans) Tony McDade (and Aja Raquell Rhone-Spears, Brian ‘Egypt’ Powers, Sumer Taylor, Tatiana Hall . . .); wide-scale attempts by the Republican Party to restrict the freedoms of trans youth under the cover of a pandemic; the emergence of venture-capital backed transition companies that nonetheless capitalize on structural trans isolation and abandonment through “the promise of happiness,” Euphoria, and Bliss—the one thing I know on this side of all this and more is that times recur.⁴ More than anything, therefore, *The Terrible We* is

a record of an attempt—an often awkward, sometimes chaotic, but hopefully ultimately space-clearing attempt—to think with the terrible parts of the felt life of trans and trans studies under these conditions.

* * *

The writing and thinking that follows—with all of its partiality and faults and untimely movements—is mine but depends on the labor and living of so many others. This book began at Stanford University, where I benefitted tremendously from the mentorship of Paula Moya, whose intellect and care enabled my trajectory through graduate school (and everything after). Likewise, I am grateful for the time, encouragement, and formative lessons in creativity and capacious thought provided by my other committee members, Sianne Ngai and Lochlann Jain. I owe thanks, too, to Jennifer DeVere Brody, Michele Elam, Mark McGurl, Sharika Thiranagama, Stephen Sohn, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, other faculty who, in one way or another, helped me along. My life and work at Stanford were enriched and enlivened by time and conversation with innumerable other students across campus, perhaps especially: K. J. Cerankowski, David Stentiford, Ben Allen, Corey Masao Johnson, Laura Eliasieh, Rebecca Wilbanks, Annika Butler-Wall, Luz Jimenez Ruvalcaba, Melanie Leon, Jonathan Leal, Calvin Cheung-Miaw, Vanessa Seals, Aku Ammah-Tagoe, Annie Atura Bushnell, Jess Auerbach, and Kate Turner. Thanks also to Mel Y. Chen for inviting me along to a University of California, Berkeley, Center for Race and Gender/Center for the Study of Sexual Culture dissertation retreat, and to the other faculty and students in that nourishing space.

I'm so grateful to have landed in Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies (wgss) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, particularly, and among wonderful colleagues and friends across the Five Colleges more generally. Thanks especially to Angie Willey, Banu Subramaniam, Kiran Asher, Svati Shah, Miliann Kang, Laura Briggs, Laura Ciolkowski, Kirsten Leng, Fumi Okiji, Jina Kim, Britt Rusert, Ren-yo Hwang, Elliot Montague, Samuel Ace, Sonny Nordmarken, Sony Coráñez Bolton, Andrea Lawlor, Jordy Rosenberg, and Ocean Vuong. Also, thank you to all of the program administrators of every department/program I have passed through—particularly Karen Lederer, Linda Hillenbrand, Monica P. Moore, and Rachel Meisels—without whom nothing would happen.

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Krauthamer and the College of Humanities and Fine Arts at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A portion of chapter 1 was originally published as “‘She of the Pants and No Voice’: Jack Bee Garland’s Disability Drag,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2020): 20–36; and an earlier version of chapter 2 appeared as “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 819–41. I thank these editors for giving these essays their first homes. Further, individual chapters of *The Terrible We* benefited from brilliant audiences, interlocutors, and event organizers at the 2019 Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges funded Queer/Trans* of Color Critique (AALAC QTOCC) Summer Writing Workshop at Mt. Holyoke College, the English Department of the University of Virginia, the University of Mt. Union, Duke University, the 2019–20 Five College Crossroads in the Studies of the Americas (CISA) Seminar, the Pennsylvania State University’s Transforming Feminist and Gender Studies Colloquium, and the University of Cambridge’s Queer Cultures Research Seminar. Aside from these scripted appearances, I am for better and for worse something of a trans recluse, which means that many of the intimacies that have enabled my thinking here are mostly (or entirely) virtual and/or one-sided. But for varied reasons, this book would not exist without Trish Salah, Aren Z. Aizura, Hil Malatino, Susan Stryker, Alison Kafer, Cael Keegan, Amy Marvin, and Kai Green, among many others. I am also tremendously grateful for the keen eye and ranging intellect of Zoe Tuck, who helped ready *The Terrible We* (and me!) for review, and for the insight, enthusiasm, and helpful reorientations of my three anonymous reviewers. More generally, I have been lucky to find myself buoyed by the hard-won infrastructures of trans studies, up to and including the *ASTERISK* book series at Duke University Press. In a profound way, I owe the present form of my life to all of those involved in trans studies’ institutional maintenance. This includes all of the workers at Duke University Press, especially the wonderful Elizabeth Ault and Benjamin Kossak, who saw this project through.

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On Staying with the Terrible *We*

But the old Frankie had had no we to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice—and that was the last we in the world she wanted.—CARSON MCCULLERS, *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* (1946)

How much goodness, after all, must one attribute to her identity objects of study to withstand what it means to both represent and be represented by them?—ROBYN WIEGMAN, *OBJECT LESSONS* (2012)

In the years leading up to the 2013 publication of the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), gender identity disorder (GID) became a concentrated site of contestation. Although freeing transgender identities from the grasp of medical regulation and the stigma of pathology had long been a goal of transgender activism, the revision process made the contents of the DSM again unstable, up for debate, prompting a flurry of discussion about whether, how, and why the GID diagnosis should be revised. It was in this context that I found myself participating in a workshop focused on the preliminary draft revisions to GID that were, at the time, available for public review and comment. The workshop, part of the 2010 Transgender Lives: The Intersections of Health and Law conference held annually at the University of Connecticut, was intended to equip participants with the tools to

engage in this conversation that would ultimately affect our lives.¹ While I didn't walk away from the hour-long session with any clarity as to what I believed an adequate revision might be, I did leave with a bad feeling, one that, retrospectively, became the seed of this book.

During the workshop, a white woman sitting near the front of the room stood up and, through tears, told us that she was the mother of a happy, well-adjusted transgender teenager. Illuminated by the projection of a proposed revision that would continue to describe her son in the language of psychiatric disorder, she insisted, "My son is not sick!" In my memory, this was her only contribution to the workshop, but it opened up what seemed then to be a very strange space of shared pathos. Momentarily, divergent lines of thought and argument were brought into accordance with one another around the "fact" of not-sickness. Before, it had been clear that everyone in the room had a slightly different set of stakes in the conversation, that there was no obvious answer to the GID problem. Suddenly, however, here was the one thing on which everyone in the room seemed to agree: this woman's son was not sick.

If this anecdote feels familiar, it's likely because it echoes the one that Susan Stryker uses to introduce *The Transgender Studies Reader*, the anthology that "gave a name to the field."² In her story, Stryker herself attended a panel at a conference, fifteen years earlier. The scene opens with Stryker standing in line to "register a protest" that the panel, on various forms of racialized and otherwise queer gender nonnormativities, featured no transgender panelists and seemed to collapse gender diversity into sexual desire. Before she can articulate this critique, however, she finds herself thrust into "in a fog of righteous anger" by another conference-goer's opposing and "all-too-familiar diatribe," imploring the panelists to reject "the disturbing new trend" of trans politics and interpretive practices "because everybody knew that transsexuals were profoundly psychopathological individuals who mutilated their bodies and believed in oppressive gender stereotypes." From within her fog, Stryker reports that she "leaned into the microphone on [her] side of the room and said, interrupting, 'I'm not sick.'"³ In 1995, Stryker was, quite literally, interrupting "a line of thinking that passed at that time for a progressive point of view" that sought to exclude transsexuals from queer/feminist politics and knowledge production. In this story, *I'm not sick* functioned as a powerful speech act that cleared the room, literally and figuratively, of those who would dismiss trans people's authority to "be taken seriously on our own terms," a precondition for the existence of what has become

transgender studies.⁴ Indeed, in a second anecdote, Stryker returns to the scene of the conference ten years later, and when the same man stands to register his same complaint, he is promptly told by several of the numerous trans people in attendance to “shut up and sit down,” indexing the profound success of the trans intellectual project in the United States. A feel-good ending.

And yet. Something about the durability and persuasiveness of the space opened by (and the reflection of) *I’m not / my son is not sick* made me—still makes me—profoundly uneasy. Two things, really. First, how quickly a complex conversation with multiple stakeholders—including incarcerated trans people who have relied on the GID diagnosis to make claims, albeit curtailed ones, to gender-affirming treatment—resolved into something like consensus because of the righteous invocation of a well-adjusted, well-supported, white trans child. Or, in the Stryker anecdotes, how quickly various forms of racialized gender are eclipsed by *trans* through the righteous anger of a white trans woman. And, second, that both of these moves toward consolidation could be produced only in direct opposition to the word *sick*. Thus, while this book shares much with Stryker’s introduction—a deep investment in the flourishing of the intellectual project of trans studies as something distinct from (though proximate to) queer and feminist studies; an effort to map the field’s origin stories in relation to its present trajectories; and ultimately, a commitment to ways of knowing developed in and by trans life—it works against the strategy of securing trans authority through the disavowal of *sick* on which, in Stryker’s account and elsewhere, trans studies is founded.

Retooling this habit of trans thought is perhaps particularly necessary in this long moment in US culture, in which a range of trans bodies, lives, and narratives has become, again, newly visible and affirmable, prompting a relatively widespread liberal announcement of the incorporation of *trans* as yet one more form of minority difference. At the same time, the still-suspect health and sanity of transgender people undergirds everything from mid-pandemic legislative attempts to strip health care and other basic freedoms from trans kids, to hand-wringing about mundane and nonmedical aspects of transition in the pages of the *New York Times*, to the reversal of Obama-era policies regarding the enlistment of transgender service members. Much trans-affirmative discourse responds to this state of affairs by reaffirming the sanity/health of trans people by pointing to, for example, studies that link supported social transition to lower rates of depression and anxiety in trans youth, demonstrating that “being transgender is not synonymous with

[mental health] challenges.”⁵ The incorporation of *trans*, that is, seems to hinge on whether it can be effectively decoupled from pathology, mental illness, and feeling bad.

In many ways, *The Terrible We* responds to this extended *right now*, to the disorienting trans 2010s (and now 2020s) in the United States. However, while it is only within the terms of *right now* that “a trans person can . . . be considered able-minded” within (some) dominant discourses in the first place, the pervasive undergirding assumption that knowledge, politics, and a worthwhile life depend on “distancing ourselves from disabled and mentally suspect others” has been a recurring ableist conceit of progressive movements and thought.⁶ While narrowly focused on white trans[masculine] contexts, *The Terrible We* works generally against the premise that sanity/health indexed by the absence of bad feeling should be necessary to secure the authority of minoritarian subjects and thought in the first place, given that the horizon of health and happiness is itself a “promise that directs you toward certain objects” and ways of knowing, a normalizing technology.⁷ Against the imperative of happiness, disciplinary discourses of health, and adjustment to a murderous given—and inspired by work in “the introspective turn” of feminist and queer studies—*The Terrible We* gathers tools from disability studies, queer and feminist studies of affect/emotion, and an archive of trans[masculine] writing to argue for and model a version of *trans* that thinks with, rather than against, what I call *trans maladjustment*.⁸

Trans Maladjustment

In the 1970s manifesto depicted in figure Intro.1, members of three trans liberation groups came together to lay out a list of demands that, from the vantage of the present, articulate a startlingly familiar (if more forcefully utopian) trans politics. Toward the goal of trans liberation, they demand the end to the policing of gendered clothing and comportment, the end to anti-trans discrimination in general and “within the gay world” in particular, the end to exploitative extraction of knowledge and capital from trans bodies (free hormones and surgery on demand), the ability to change one’s identification documents “with no difficulty,” the end to incarceration in prisons and mental institutions on the basis of trans status, and so on.⁹

Indeed, in addition to foreshadowing contemporary trans activism, the manifesto anticipates the terms of my opening anecdotes as, in the second sentence, its authors insist: “we reject all labels of ‘stereotype’ ‘sick’ or ‘mal-adjusted’ from non-transvestic and non-transsexual sources and defy any

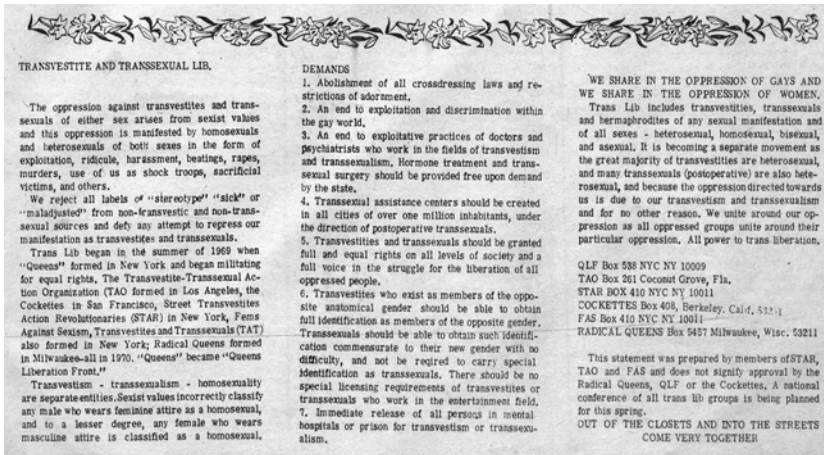


FIGURE INTRO.1. Transvestite and Transsexual Liberation Manifesto, as printed in *Gay Dealer: The Rage of Philadelphia* (October 1970). Accessed in Gale's Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

attempt to repress our manifestation as transvestites and transsexuals.” On the one hand, this statement seems to confirm Jasbir Puar’s observation that “historically and contemporaneously, the nexus of disability and trans has been fraught,” at least in part because trans people have often “resist[ed] alliances with people with disabilities in no small part because of long struggles against stigmatization and pathologization that may be reinvoked through such affiliations.”¹⁰ On another hand, rather than refusing the affiliation outright, the manifesto leaves an evocative space for precisely the kind of politics and analysis that Puar calls for, in which critical trans and disability theory/politics “each acknowledges and inhabits the more generalized conditions of the other.”¹¹ That is, the manifesto’s authors leave open the possibility that, when made *from within trans life*, the association of *trans* with *sick/maladjusted* might be commensurate with trans “manifestation” and liberation.¹² They remind us in advance that trans liberation need not rely on stigmatophobic claims that cut trans off from a broader minoritarian *we* (trans ≠ sick); rather, they contest the use of *stereotype/sick/maladjusted* to deauthorize trans lifeworlds. Further, insofar as a primary object of the authors’ critique was the power of medical practitioners to describe, contain, exploit, and otherwise regulate their nonnormative bodyminds and modes of living, their demands articulate the link between trans and gay liberation and contemporaneous disability and mad liberation movements.¹³ Of course,

by retaining an identitarian focus—by demanding, for example, the “immediate release of all persons in mental hospitals or prisons *for tranvestism or transsexualism*”—this particular manifesto does not take aim at medicolegal regulation per se; it merely contests that the trans subject is its proper object.¹⁴ However, by leaving open the possibility that claims of trans sickness and maladjustment might not always be hostile to trans manifestation—might indeed be commensurate with trans liberation—they leave open the possibility that this book pursues; namely, that trans maladjustment might, in fact, still be a resource for trans thought.

Briefly, *trans maladjustment* is my shorthand for the tight, durable association between trans identity and particular bad feelings and mad habits of thought that show up again and again in transphobic and trans-affirmative discourse alike, things like depression, social withdrawal, unruly post-traumatic identity/affect, suicidality, dysphoria, feeling haunted, and so on. Insofar as I understand these forms of cognitive/affective divergence as endemic to trans experience, my attention to trans maladjustment resonates with—though does not exactly answer—Alexandre Baril’s call to develop a “conception of transness that includes its debilitating physiological, mental, emotional or social aspects” that are not necessarily reducible to oppression.¹⁵ That is, while the predominant version of contemporary trans-affirmative thought encourages us to read these forms of trans maladjustment only as outcomes of oppression, “symptomatic of the destructive forces in which these infelicitous subjects [are] caught,” I read them as (also) integral to trans epistemology and cultural production: they point toward ways of knowing (and not-knowing), of living (and not-living) that arise from within being so caught.¹⁶

The term *maladjustment* means simply “imperfect or faulty adjustment” or, more dismally, “failure to meet the requirements for social life.”¹⁷ One can track in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s illustrative quotations the drifting of *maladjustment* from a more general and neutral use as, roughly, *misfit between two or more things*—a relation—into a sociological use in which this relation was narrowed to be the one between the social and the individual, and finally, into the realm of psychology, where in the early twentieth century it came to take on a sense of being (or being evidence of) an incapacity of a person or organism to adapt to life, rather than strictly a relation. Grammatically, this entails a shift from “maladjustment between” to simply “maladjustment,” a loss of preposition that in turn was (and is) used to rationalize intervention into or elimination/abandonment of racialized, feminized, gender nonconforming, mad, neurodivergent, or disabled people who trouble and are troubled by the requirements for officially sanctioned social life.¹⁸ As

one salient example, George Rekers justified his infamous, career-launching, devastating “treatment” of a gender-nonconforming five-year-old child, who appears in Rekers’s writing under the pseudonym “Kraig,” using the framework of maladjustment. A psychologist and cofounder of the Family Research Council—classified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as an anti-LGBTQ hate group—Rekers insisted that intensive, emotionally and sometimes physically violent intervention into Kraig’s “rigidly feminine” bodily comportment, clothing and toy choices, style of play, vocal inflections, and so forth was “ethically and psychologically appropriate” because it corrected maladjustment in the present and ward off “more serious maladjustment” (i.e., transsexuality) “in the future.”¹⁹ Specifically, Rekers claimed that such interventions developed Kraig’s capacity to flexibly adjust to a world where he was, as he was, marked out for “social isolation and ridicule.”²⁰ That is, although Rekers and his mentor Ivar Lovaas (who in the 1960s and 1970s engineered the applied behavior analysis method of “treating” autistic kids using identical, if often more obviously abusive, methods) recognized that Kraig’s “suffering” was relational—the result of others’ responses to his way of living—they at the same time located maladjustment as what arose from *within* Kraig, specifically his “deeply ingrained, chronic maladaptive patterns of behavior,” feelings, and thought.²¹ A relation came to be understood as a condition.

Throughout this book, I use *maladjustment* in a way that is inflected by both “expert” and colloquial uses. However, as this book is not a genealogy of the term there are many others—bad feelings, madness, and so on—that I might have foregrounded instead.²² But my use of *maladjustment* in particular emerges, in part, from an affinity for disability studies, sharing much with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s concept of misfit, as what occurs when an “environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body; that enters it” and has the consequence of producing misfitting bodies as social misfits.²³ But *maladjustment* also names a particular, fraught relationship to “disability” as a legal and political category that promises access to the full range of rights and benefits of citizenship through antidiscrimination law and social services, even if only symbolically, contingently, and as an ever-receding horizon. Indeed, while the word has largely fallen out of use, one area in which it continues to have currency is in the administration of accessible education as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), the current federal law that claims to ensure that students with disabilities have access to public education and that expressly excludes from this assurance students who are “socially maladjusted.”²⁴ *Maladjustment*, therefore, marks the space where (physical, psychic, or social) impairment

cannot become protectable disability, where difference does not or cannot become officially recuperable by these means. In fact, as discussed in chapter 1, this is precisely the status of *trans* in the post-1990s United States, as it is a category that is likewise included in federal disability law in the form of an exclusion.

Embedded in *maladjustment*'s definition, then, as well as in its present uses, is an emphasis on the way in which personhood is premised on the capacity to cultivate certain forms of feeling, habits of thought, and styles of relating—on meeting certain requirements. Although my opening anecdotes might have suggested otherwise, my conception of trans maladjustment therefore shares much with one of Susan Stryker's other founding documents: her endlessly generative theorization and performance of trans madness as trans monstrosity and rage. Framed as it is by Transgender Nation's protest of the pathologization of trans identity at the 1993 American Psychiatric Association's annual meeting, Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" can be read as a maladjusted theorization of the conditions that produce trans rage—conditions that include feminist and queer transphobia; compulsory gendering; and the discipline and regulation of gender nonconformity through deeming its subjects disordered—that simultaneously regards that rage as enabling trans ways of thinking and being. Specifically, Stryker's essay is *mad* in at least four interrelated senses of the word: it records and thinks with the phenomenological experience of breakdown; it privileges felt life over and against enlightenment rationality; it is, plainly, furious; and it rages, in part, against the regulation of gender variance by psychology, specifically the political, epistemic, and psychic effects of being subject to diagnosis.²⁵

While trans monstrosity animated by rage is certainly one recognizable form of trans maladjustment, in *The Terrible We* I am more interested in figures and feelings endemic to trans life that cannot easily be understood as politically enabling or as "mobilize[d] . . . into effective political actions."²⁶ What "My Words" and the introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader* share, after all, is a narrative of righteous trans anger that moves things along by puncturing trans-antagonistic conditions. But, despite the literal and metaphorical association of transition and transness itself with travel, mobility, and movement, trans life under racial capitalism is at least as much about stuckness, waiting, "lag time," and recurrence—about living indefinitely, in Hil Malatino's terms, "in interregnum, in the crucial and transformative moments between past and future, between the regime of what was and the promise of what might be."²⁷ Accordingly, the forms of maladjustment I think with—depression, dissociation, and asociality/withdrawal—are less

like Stryker's rage and more like Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings," insofar as each offers a mode of investigating and perhaps bearing "ambivalent situations of suspended agency."²⁸

Finally, although I certainly use the language of feeling, I tend toward the word *maladjustment* to retain the associated negativity and baggage and to foreground constellations of feeling, thought, style, and habit. Further, unlike feeling, forms of maladjustment might be understood as chronic, marked by long durations, persistent enough that they can become the ground of identity—a relation comes to be understood as a condition. This is the crucial difference between, for example, feeling social anxiety and being a recluse, feeling depressed and being a depressive, trans desire/dysphoria and trans identity, and so on. Thus, forms of maladjustment, in my usage, contain, cause, or coincide with bad feelings—feelings that are experientially painful, understood as potentially pathological in a diagnostic setting, or politically impairing—but are not reducible to them.

In the remainder of this introduction, I set out to do three things. First, I lay out a brief account of how and why the "methodological distancing" from *sick* has shaped the intellectual and affective horizon of trans studies.²⁹ Second, I offer an alternative entry point into the project—which is as much about trans literature as it is about trans thought—through a reading of Jack Halberstam's reading of Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*. I do so both because Frankie Addams's plot and the way Halberstam took it up in the late 1990s serve as an apt allegory for the dynamic within trans thought that I seek to address and because Frankie herself helps me to clarify what, in this text, I take *trans* to mean. And, finally, I sketch the project in full, including an outline of its individual chapters and a primer on its (sometimes idiosyncratic) vocabulary and grammar.

Feeling Trans, Trans Authority

"Transsexuality," Lucas Cassidy Crawford writes, "is a matter of affect at least as much as it is a matter of certain procedures of gender transition."³⁰ And while Crawford writes here against the harnessing of trans feeling into a single trans narrative, it is true that, over the course of the late twentieth century, we have witnessed the production and consolidation of what scholars have called the transnormative subject. *Trans*, that is, has become widely legible as a particular set of feelings (gendered unease, restlessness, suicidality) that necessitate a particular set of narrative movements (self-discovery, coming out, transition) for the health and persistence of the trans protagonist/subject

within the terms of the liberal-imperial state. In this rendering, *trans* is a feeling that precedes, requires, and so justifies the project of medical or social transition, of living a trans life; for this reason, much ink has been spilled over the question of “what transsexuality feels like.”³¹ Although this book is undoubtedly another entry into that record, I conjoin it to a related question. Namely, “What does trans studies feel like?” After all, fields are a matter of affect, feeling, and desire at least as much as they are a matter of certain procedures of knowledge production.

As a book that adds to the objects of trans studies only insofar as it takes the emotional habitus of trans studies as its object, *The Terrible We* is most closely aligned with recent work in feminist and queer studies that has taken stock of how the institutionalization of the political desires called *feminism*, *queer liberation*, and *antiracism* has shaped the knowledge projects of women’s/gender studies, queer theory, and black feminism. Notable among these are Clare Hemmings’s account of the political consequences of the stories that Anglo-American academic feminism tells about itself; Heather Love’s attention to how present desires for *emotional rescue* shape approaches to the queer past, and to what queer studies might teach us about “living with injury—not fixing it”; Jennifer Nash’s diagnosis of black feminist defensiveness about *intersectionality*, what it enables and what it forecloses; Kadjji Amin’s argument for, and modeling of, a queer studies driven by *deidealization*; and Robyn Wiegman’s taking very seriously that “objects of study are as fully enmeshed in fantasy, projection, and desire as those that inhabit the more familiar itinerary of intimate life.”³²

Wiegman characterizes the psychic life of what she terms *identity knowledges* as being driven by the desire for critical practice to produce justice and the belief that our objects—and our relations to them—might deliver it. The institutionalization of this disciplinary structure of desire places an enormous burden on our objects to be “adequate to the political commitments that inspire” us and to, therefore, be good—desirable, politically enabling, conduits of good feeling, and so forth.³³ Further, one of the ways that justice is routinely “figured” within such fields is “by claiming for minoritized subjects the right to study themselves and to make themselves the object of their study.”³⁴ This definition of justice, in turn, produces a closeness between critics and our objects that, Wiegman suggests, makes it “harder to bear the psychic burdens” of the inevitable failure of our objects—of ourselves—to live up to our desires for them: “how much goodness, after all, must one attribute to her identity objects of study to withstand what it means to both represent and be represented by them?”³⁵