

ARTICLE

Bones without Flesh and (Trans)Gender without Bodies: Querying Desires for Trans Historicity

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Abstract

In 2011, a 5,000-year-old “male” skeleton buried in a “female” way was discovered by an archaeological team just outside of modern-day Prague. This article queries the impulse to name such a discovery as evidence of transgender identity, and bodies, in an increasingly ancient past. To do so, it takes up the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Sylvia Wynter, and Hortense Spillers as a means to push back against the impetus to name such discoveries “transgender” in order to shore up the legitimacy of contemporary trans identity. Each of these three thinkers offers a different vantage point for rethinking such naming practices that push the reader to consider how desires to name and place “transgender” in a distant past papers over the violence of plantation slavery, global imperialism, and the Enlightenment’s shift toward scientific reason. This article argues not that such anthropological discoveries should not be considered transgender, but rather that the desire for them to be, or become, transgender does not legitimate contemporary transgender identity, and may instead treat certain iterations of transness as spatially and temporally universal.

In 2011, a team of researchers from the Czech Archaeological Society discovered an approximately 5,000-year-old skeleton in a suburb of Prague. Found buried with domestic items and no weapons, the research team concluded that, per the rituals of the Copper Age in the region, the skeleton was interred as if it were female. To their surprise, however, the team discerned that the skeleton was male. At a press conference following their discovery, lead researcher Kamila Remisová Vesinová claimed that the skeleton was possibly “homosexual,” “transvestite,” “third gender,” “transgender,” or “transsexual” (Barber 2011; McDowell 2011). Depending also upon one’s chosen source of news outlet, this skeleton could represent “the first gay caveman,” according to *The Telegraph* (2011), or a “transgender skeleton,” according to *Pink News* (Gean 2011). While the skeleton dates to the Copper Age rather than the Stone Age associated with Neanderthals, and indeed the category caveman is a tenuous one, the skeleton’s status as evidentiary of either homosexuality, transness, or third gender within local

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cultures during the same era was hotly debated for years. In fact, the research lead, Vesínová, went on after this discovery to write a book (Vesínová 2017) in Czech about archaeology and gender. The debates raged across blogs by other archaeologists and anthropologists, armchair and otherwise, with most flatly dismissing the very idea that this was evidence of anything at all other than perhaps grave robbing or a lack of wealth.¹ But what piques my own interest in this article are the stakes of claiming this skeleton, and other historical discoveries like it, as evidence of the existence of what I call “transgender without bodies.”

I want to focus here on the ways in which these discoveries of “transgender” without bodies, in bones without flesh, are necessarily bound up in quite modern articulations of transgender as omnipresent across time and place. Unearthing such “discoveries”—that is, naming an archaeological find as transgender—works to legitimate the existence of transgender people contemporaneously. There was a tendency within public debate on this discovery to either flatly condemn the reach backward into an ancient past and superimpose contemporary understandings of sex, gender, and/or sexuality, or to unequivocally take up the discovery as evidence that “we have always existed.”² Rather than choosing one side of the argument or the other, I aim to interrogate the stakes of the debate overall with a focus on the desire for legitimacy and validation that serves as the impetus for the position that this Copper Age skeleton proves that trans people have always existed. My project therefore necessitates a conversation across disciplines that includes a thorough reading of some Black feminist scholars who are less frequently read in feminist philosophy.³ A transdisciplinary conversation like this may be less common in most philosophy circles, but it is not unusual within the burgeoning field of transgender studies. Indeed, the rapid growth of transgender studies as a field has fueled the flames of many of these ongoing conversations about history and who or what counts as trans, and one result has been a push for interdisciplinary expansion of the burgeoning field.

To this end, 2013 saw the release of a second *Transgender Studies Reader* in which the editors, Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, introduce the volume by naming the strengthening of transgender studies in the academy since the 2006 inaugural edition (Stryker and Aizura 2013, 5). Stryker and Aizura also ask why historians take “man” and “woman” as transhistorically applicable gender categories (even as they scoff at using transgender anachronistically) (6), and suggest that transgender is a global assemblage that necessitates a strategic consideration of how transgender studies can advance an antiracist and anticolonial agenda (7–9). In the only chapter of the volume that specifically addresses archaeology, Mary Weismantel goes so far as to say that the choice not to reckon with archaeology runs the risk of “impoverishing our sense of the past, and our understanding of who we are and where we came from” (Weismantel 2013, 320). Her intervention is both into the nascent field of trans studies and into archaeology. Weismantel claims the first step taken toward trans archaeology will necessarily be destructive because it requires “tearing off the layers of unsupported assumptions about sex and gender that encrust the archaeological record” (320). Even further, she argues that “interpreting evidence . . . from a transgender perspective doesn’t mean artificially forcing ancient phenomena into a new and ill-fitting category. If anything, the opposite seems true” (321). It is clear then that the impetus to unearth transgender phenomena in the prehistorical past seems to collude with the postmodernist shedding of structuralist assumptions, in this case of gender and sex, that has also been a rallying cry in feminist and queer theories. The transgender skeleton in question is perhaps more ubiquitous than unique, and some scholars have begun to call for transgender studies to add it to our assemblage of case studies. But what is more interesting for

my purposes in this article is Weismantel's argument that "the gender diversity of the past matters for transgender activism" (321). She contends, via Rosemary Joyce's work, that contemporaneous (mis)understandings of normatively gendered, heterosexual, nuclear familial units are more often imposed upon the ancient past than are discovered there autochthonously (Joyce 2008).

I cite the editors' introduction to the second edition of such a widely read anthology to preempt a contradiction I will sharpen through my reading of the alleged transgender skeleton found by Vesinova and her team. Although the discovery is certainly interesting and may indeed enhance contemporary understandings of the Copper Age, I argue it is also an instance of reaching backward to instantiate and calcify Western and modern systems of sex/gender/sexuality. What is perhaps new about this instance of a backward reach is that it is not primarily about solidifying the realities of heteronormative or cisnormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality as timeless or natural. Rather, it is about attempting to locate transgender and queer phenomena, realities, and bodies in ancient times. This looking backward for the ancient trans or queer subject reveals an investment in normalizing or naturalizing transgender phenomena. It is not new to argue that these modern systems of sex/gender/sexuality are colonial inventions that emerge as a direct result of violent, imperial contact. However, the broader fields of transgender studies, and feminist philosophy by extension, have yet to reckon with the simple fact that the supposed timelessness of gender diversity, especially among Indigenous peoples prior to colonialism, does not inherently validate white trans people contemporarily (Haefeke-Thomas 2019; Day 2020). Even further, as I will demonstrate in later sections unpacking the work of three Black feminist scholars, this reach backward into an ever more ancient past to shore up contemporary trans identity deracimates autochthonous gender diversity in order to deracialize it. Thus, though a thread within transgender studies, and especially trans history, critiques gender-binarism and rigid understandings of the body and sexual difference, it often does so as a means of both critiquing and subsuming racialized violence. This move places presumably white trans people (or identities or bodies) in the crosshairs of settler-colonial violence, and then obfuscates the racialized nature of that violence. In rewriting history to position contemporary white transness as both victim and savior, a move echoed in many deracialized analyses of violence against trans people and the Transgender Day of Remembrance (Lamble 2008; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Krell 2017), the stakes of history itself are lost. This alleged transgender skeleton is particularly fascinating because it appears without narration or self-identification. Instead, it is literally unearthed and labeled as empirical evidence of transgenderism, then propped up as a means of validating contemporary transness as if debunking the idea that transgender is a modern invention will improve material conditions of trans life. It is telling that an appeal to archaeology, which can be seen as the science of history, serves as a kind of elastic meant to stretch between an ancient past and the present moment and, in so doing, entrench the supposed omnipresence of transness. Although the means of arriving at such a claim are problematic, as I will demonstrate, the impulse to jump to empirical evidence and to rely upon history and science are, to a certain extent and especially from a vantage point of whiteness, understandable. What follows, then, is an attempt to unpack that investment in reaching backward and to problematize not just the mapping of contemporaneous sex/gender/sexuality systems anachronistically, but also the desire to find transness or queerness in the past as the impetus for such a mapping.

To begin to understand the desire that instantiates a backward reach into ancient history, we must also understand the discipline of archaeology. As a field, it relies

upon scientific methods to ask questions about past human cultures. This means that archaeology is necessarily a disciplinary mode of knowledge-production that works through both Science and History to think Culture. Here, I capitalize all three of these to underline their significance as discourses that exceed their practitioners' attempts to delineate what constitutes science, history, or culture as disciplines. Since archaeology is a branch of anthropology, that is, the study of humans in the past and present, according to the American Anthropological Association, it is necessarily entangled in the epistemologies of all three of these disciplines and discourses. Rather than immediately deconstructing or criticizing archaeology, I instead pose some questions. What does archaeology want? And what might archaeology want, specifically, from this skeleton? What kinds of knowledge does archaeology hope to produce from it? And how might the answers to the questions archaeology asks be limited by its own investments in gender and race as they are bound up in History and Science?

My attempt to unpack these desires and the reach backward, and to contextualize archaeology and its desires, will rely upon three Black feminist scholars (see note 3): Denise Ferreira da Silva, Sylvia Wynter, and Hortense Spillers. I choose to think about this “transgender skeleton” through these thinkers’ work because of how they problematize history, science, and understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Each asks onto-epistemological questions that center race and gender in ways that demand a reckoning with the very tools of archaeology, and thereby of Science, History, and Culture. Rather than looking first and foremost to scholars in the emerging field of transgender history, such as Susan Stryker, Joanne Meyerowitz, and others, I engage thinkers who could be called Black feminists in order to interrogate the racial logics of this reaching backward. This is not to say that scholars of trans history have nothing important to say in a conversation about desires for locating the transgender subject in time immemorial. It is to say, however, that posing questions about finding or creating transgender in the past is not divorced from what Ferreira da Silva calls the analytics of raciality as “the region of modern knowledge manufactured by the sciences of man and society” (Ferreira da Silva 2007, xv). Further, I am not interested in decrying the desire to locate oneself, or even a version or verisimilitude of oneself, in the past on moral grounds. In fact, as a transgender person I understand fully the desire to be recognized or to be found in the past and thereby validated in the present. Instead, I am concerned with contextualizing that desire for the ways in which it emerges from the racial logics of modernity and the onto-epistemological presuppositions of, following Ferreira da Silva, historicity and globality. Additionally, I hypothesize that an engagement with Wynter’s theory of the sociogenic principle elucidates the origins of such a desire while also revealing their potential coloniality. Last, a consideration of Spillers’s thoughts on bodies and flesh within the plantation system and its afterlives sheds light on the futility of locating transgender in bones without flesh. The article will end with some conclusions about the stakes of thinking trans historicity in light of engagement with Ferreira da Silva, Wynter, and Spillers that, hopefully, understand and sympathize with the desire to locate trans in the past while still interrogating the epistemological structures of power that allow for the question to be posed of where and when we can find transgender.

Historicity, Scientific Universality, and Archaeology’s Dangerous Desires

Ferreira da Silva’s monograph *Toward a Global Idea of Race* grapples with the history of Western knowledge in such a dense way that is simultaneously generous and critical,

that it is, at times, overwhelming (Ferreira da Silva 2007). For that reason, and for the sake of brevity, it is necessary to home in on her analysis of the play of reason as much as possible even though the entire work demands a shift in how we think about knowledge and knowledge-production. Specifically, I am interested in how she outlines the role that history, as field and as narrative or discourse, plays in constituting science. I am concerned by the ramifications for thinking historicity generally, and transgender history and historicity specifically, when we take seriously Ferreira da Silva's claims about the formation of science as reliant upon the establishment of History's authority, and its status as a racializing project. Essentially, Ferreira da Silva urges us to ask what is at stake in privileging historicity and how can we ask questions of history, and of science, without reproducing the logic of universality, which necessarily produces the means by which critical race theorists and postmodern thinkers, she argues, have attempted to solve problems of exclusion and representation (xxvi). I foreground her theory of the work of History and historicity so that I can sharpen the contradiction of anachronistically seeking the contemporary (transgender) in the ancient past (the Copper Age). This necessarily entails understanding and interrogating how the historical and the scientific, and indeed archaeology as a science of history, were not only founded upon, but continue to reproduce, what she calls an analytics of raciality.

Ferreira da Silva contends that the analytics of raciality do not fully emerge in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Western philosophy, but the conditions for it, universality and historicity, do. In the chapter "The Play of Reason," she delineates two scenes, the scene of regulation, "where [reason] becomes *universal nomos*, a constraining or regulative force, the one refigured by universality," and the scene of representation, "where [reason] becomes a productive power, the one that historicity refigures" (38). The former is found largely in John Locke's writings about which Ferreira da Silva avers, "what one finds in Locke's description of the political society, the artificial body that individuals institute, is the articulation of the first modern ontological descriptor, *universality*" (52). For Ferreira da Silva, Locke's attempt to reconcile political society, or really the potential subjection of the individual will to an exterior will, with self-determination, as the foundational tenet of reason and the interior will, results in "rewriting exterior determination as an effect of individuals' (interior and rational) decisions" (53). At play here, as we will see, is the racial logic that undergirds not only the dynamic of the subjection of an interior will to an exterior will, but also the very notion of an interior will. Reason, according to Ferreira da Silva, begets historicity and with it all the political ramifications thereof. Further, in the later sections I will expand upon this reading of Ferreira da Silva to situate Wynter's and Spillers's lines of argumentation alongside Ferreira da Silva's contention that universality and historicity prop up and enable the analytics of raciality about which she writes. For now, it is worth delving deeper with further exegesis into Ferreira da Silva's reading of Enlightenment philosophy in order to unpack how historicity becomes an extension of racial logics that enable a contemporary claiming of transgender without a body in bones without flesh.

The scene of representation, in contrast to the scene of regulation above, is found largely in G. W. Leibniz and his rewriting of "the play of reason as universal poesis in a statement that consolidates temporality as a proper ontoepistemological moment" (54). This scene of representation, or autopoiesis, in Leibniz is then "an account of the play of reason that describes how all existing things constitute actualizations of the 'inner force' and 'intrinsic difference' housed in their 'souls' or 'spirits'" (54). Ultimately, Ferreira da Silva's reading of Leibniz as instantiating a scene of representation means

“reason becomes universal poesis; it plays the role of a productive power, the principle that guides the temporal realization, the coming into existence, of the unique force it places in the interiority of each particular thing” (55). We find universality in the form of political society or juridical law, to which man consents in order to protect his property (life, liberty, and estate), but we find historicity in the scene of representation that is the ontological descriptor that later allows for philosophers and thinkers to look for the realization of these guiding principles of things’ spirits (57). This is to say that the regulating subject, the exterior will to which other beings can be subjected, precedes autopoiesis. That is, in this line of thinking Ferreira da Silva unpacks, the ability to locate oneself, or perhaps someone like oneself, in history relies upon the ability to regulate an Other, specifically a Black or perhaps Indigenous other. One can represent oneself because one is able to regulate an Other. And indeed, in our case of the transgender skeleton, or the imagined ancient transgender subject, to represent the contemporary transgender subject in the ancient past requires that the bones without flesh becomes a transgender subject without a body or a means to represent themselves. Put another way, representation, in the ancient past, *is* regulation.

This instantiation of reason as evidence of the interiority of a particular thing becomes the means by which the racialized Other is relegated to the realm of exteriority, or a space without reason or the capacity for it. For our purposes in this article, the construction of exteriority as racialized is necessary to understand because it enables the contemporary trans subject, equipped with interiority and the capacity to reason, to locate itself in the ancient past. It renders an active construction of an ancient transgender subject, or object, a discovery and effectively erases any interiority or subjectivity that that subject may have had in life. On the topic of interiority and exteriority, Ferreira da Silva goes on to say that “two ontoepistemological moments, the *stage of exteriority* and the *stage of interiority*, assembled by descriptions of how the mind and the things of nature are situated before universal reason” necessarily also correspond “to a region of signification—respectively, *science* and *history*—that together compose modern representation” (58). Having established the work of history and its signification in and through the privileging of temporality and of historicity, we can think through scientific signification, at least as it begins to emerge in eighteenth-century Western thought. Ferreira da Silva contends that scientific reason necessitates exteriority precisely because “knowledge with certainty . . . rests on both the use of the human body, that exterior dimension of the knowing subject through which it relates to the things it seeks to know, and the rewriting of reason as the universal (exterior) foundation shared by the mind and these things” (41). But scientific reason can come about only through the prior work to reconcile that which is external to the self, universal poesis, as necessarily interior to the thinking thing because the external was merely an extension of the rational subject or the actualization of his spirits or inner forces. This means that science as a field and as a modality of reason comes to rely upon the previously established privileging of historicity, and thereby interiority, even as science comes to concern itself with the exterior, observable, affectable world. As we shall see, then, archaeology can be seen as the science of historicity.

If history as a field is “the region of modern knowledge that assumes time as the privileged ontoepistemological dimension” (xv), then science is “the region of modern knowledge that posits space as the privileged ontoepistemological dimension” (xvi). Thus history, with its deployment of historicity in order to establish universality whether political (Locke) or moral (Leibniz), begets science and allows for the latter’s shift in reasoning to privilege exteriority even as it maintains the interior-temporal

subject as *the* subject, rather than object, of scientific inquiry. Put another way, scientific reason cannot take hold in the post-Enlightenment episteme without the previous establishment of an interior-temporal and rationally sovereign subject who can subject the observable world of affectable things to inquiry and discovery in order to get at their truth. For our purposes, then, the object of archaeology, as a social-scientific discipline with historical investments, must necessarily be rendered affectable and transparently knowable. Ergo, a glance at a skeleton allows for quick and easy confirmation of the sex of the person who has long since perished, and the only confounding variable to that observation for our Copper Age remains is the historical-cultural context of its interment. Not only are the bones themselves utterly and immediately available to scientific reason and deduction, so is the culture that begat the conditions of their burial. Hence, we can see that archaeological inquiry marries historicity, complete with its enablement of the reach backward to search for the realization of humankind's inner forces and spirits, with scientific universality, that which renders the external world (and in our case, this means human beings stripped of flesh and of context), and its objects' interior truths readily knowable.

These stages, scenes, and moments, for Ferreira da Silva, need to be contextualized and thought together, structurally, in order to understand the epistemological investments that beget science and history as we know them today in and through modern representation. For her, all of this schematizing "is necessary groundwork that recuperates the *field of science* as a domain of production of modern political-symbolic strategies if one wishes to capture the effects of signification of the racial" (xxxix). It may seem that a supposedly transgender skeleton from the Copper Age unearthed just outside of Prague is a deracinated discovery and subject. However, I have demonstrated that, following Ferreira da Silva, the very logics of history and science, which archaeology marries, enable the emergence of the analytics of raciality, which I read as the imbrication of racial epistemologies with modern ways of knowing. Further, the analytics of raciality become consolidated and calcified within the fields of history and science by way of their continued uncritical deployment. This is to say that history and science were established as fields that were linked foundationally to the logic of universality, and in turn to the analytics of raciality as Ferreira da Silva describes them. That logic of universality produced others that were excluded from universal reason based on the scientific rationale that they lacked the capacity for reason itself and therefore became objects rather than subjects of scientific and historical inquiry, especially in and through anthropology. As noted in the introduction, this rendering of subject as object in the discovery of, or perhaps construction of, transgender without a body, in bones without flesh, can be reread as an act of conquering. The impulse to unearth evidence in an ancient past in order to shore up and legitimate contemporaneous transgender identity relies upon historicity and science's ability to project interiority, or to give subjectivity and take it away. As a white transgender woman, I can relate to the desire to legitimate and to reach for useful tools to make arguments in favor of gender self-determination, but I think it's worth dwelling on the source of that impulse and contextualizing it before wholesale declaring that transgender, as a category or as a phenomenon, is indeed omnipresent throughout time and space.

Ultimately, to contend with the stakes of this revelation about the work of historicity and scientific universality means to consider the possibility of epistemic upheaval, revolt. More concretely, Ferreira da Silva may not enable us to say with more, or less, certainty whether our Copper Age skeleton is indeed the first gay caveman, or the first instance of transvestism in the region, or even simply evidence of a (geographical,

cultural, historical) universality of transgenderism. She does, however, enable us to reckon with the desire for trans historicity and a collective impulse to locate it in bones without flesh, and transgender without bodies. Ferreira da Silva demands that we consider how the impetus for the reach backward and the desire to do so is bound up in the analytics of raciality precisely because of how the reach stems from an investment in historicity, and how the scientific deduction of gender, against sex, is born of universality.

Sociogeny and What Naturalization and Cultural Relevance Grant

In this section I turn to Wynter in order to further unpack the source of the desire to locate transgender in an ancient past for contemporary political purposes. Wynter's oeuvre could not be condensed into a single article. Nor could all the possible ramifications of deploying a single article of hers be adequately represented and teased out in an article of this length. However, her work is indispensable, at least once encountered, to critical thought on the formation of disciplines, the work of science and history, and the interplay of nature and culture. Further, she consistently calls for a new mode of being and becoming human that really is nothing short of a behest to disassemble the existing frameworks of knowledge-production that uphold one iteration of humanity, Man, as if it were isomorphic with the whole of the species (see Wynter 2003). What can be gleaned from her work in an article of this length, and with our specific goal of understanding what I've been calling a backward reach, is her sociogenic principle and what it offers our critique of historicity and desires for it. Additionally, in working through the sociogenic principle, we must also attend to her conceptualization of coloniality for how it is embedded in ontology, epistemology, and our very bodies and minds as Western and Westernized subjects. What I hope to offer here is a gesture toward the sociogenic principle and to coloniality that will enable us to further extrapolate from Ferreira da Silva's analysis of historicity and thereby better understand the stakes of excavating transgender in bones without flesh and across cultures and vast swaths of time. However, it is important to note that, at least here, I am wholly uninterested in the utility or futility of applying the sociogenic principle toward *explanations* of transgender phenomena, that is, in explaining their origins or whether trans identity is culturally or organically instantiated. Rather, I am concerned with understanding the desire to reach backward, whether that desire comes from trans people themselves or researchers like the Czech archaeological team, and how it might function vis-à-vis coloniality and sociogeny.

Wynter gleans sociogeny from Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008), but in "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be "Black,"" she adapts "the term *the sociogenic principle* on the basis of this concept in order to both relate it to, and contrast it with, the genomic principle defining of the species-identity of purely organic life" (Wynter 2001, 31). Her primary aim in this piece is to work from Fanon toward "a new theoretical object of knowledge, which enabled the calling in question of our present culture's purely biological definition of what it is to *be*, and therefore of what is *like to be*, human" (31). She terms this purely biological definition "biocentrism" and critiques it on the basis of Fanon's findings that many of the pathologies he encountered in his practice as a psychoanalyst were neither fully phylogenetic, nor ontogenetic, but rather, at least partially, culturally mediated. Wynter looks to linguistics, sociology, neuroscience, and other disciplines and schools of thought in order to weave together a

theory of sociogeny in elaboration of Fanon's originary gesture to it. She constructs a theory of sociogeny that can explain subjective experience, or the reason why an individual's experience of their surrounding environment and their worldview both matter and *make* matter. This is to say that, according to Wynter and her reading of neuroscientist Gerard Edelman, a given organism "must know and classify its world *adaptively*, in spite of the fact that the way it knows the world is not necessarily concordant with what that world veridically *is*, outside the terms of its own viewpoint" (48). Rather than a straightforward genetic, biological principle of self-preservation, both of the species and of the individual organism, we have now, following Wynter, a sociogenic principle that attends to how sociality influences the passing-down of subjective experiences, genetically, and becomes mutually constitutive with the facts of a given organism's, or its species', environment. Although Wynter's focus here is on the limits of the promise of Man as the stand-in for all of humanity, the sociogenic principle as she outlines it is useful for understanding the impulse to find, or rather construct, ancient instantiations of what we can call transness. It is a means of understanding an originary impulse, or, in the case of the transgender skeleton, the desire to find oneself represented throughout space and time. However, as Ferreira da Silva explains, and as I noted in the prior section, representation of another is sometimes the same as regulation of another.

Wynter emphasizes the usefulness of this theory for human beings so that it can attest to the reality of subjective experiences of what it is like to be Black. She notes:

Fanon makes evident that the middle class educated Black is socialized to experience his/our own physiognomic being, as well as his/our African cultures of origin, as "bad," as archetypally Evil . . . from which one must separate oneself if one is to be fully human to "feel good" in the terms of our present ethno-class conception of the human. (49)

Elaborating on Stan Franklin and Fanon again, she queries "at the level of human forms of life, how *exactly* is a 'normal subject' made to experience objects in the world, in the terms of its specific culture's system of perception and categorization, as being to its own adaptive advantage (good) or not (bad)" (49). To answer the question, she looks again to neurobiology and considers Avram Goldstein's work on addiction and neurochemistry. She contends that "what Goldstein suggests here is that the phenomenology of subjective experience (what *feels good* and what *feels bad* to each organism) is neurochemically determined in species-specific behavior motivating terms" (52). Wynter ultimately concludes that subjective experience (of what it is like to *be* a specific species or a specific genre of that species) is the mediating force that external stimuli pass through in order to become encoded in the objective material (that is, the neurobiology of the brain itself, its neural pathways of reward and punishment) of the human mind. She states:

It is, then, in the case of the human species, the sociogenic principle, as the information-encoding organizational principle of each culture's criterion of being/non-being, that functions to *artificially* activate the neurochemistry of the reward and punishment pathway, doing so in the terms needed to institute the human subjects as a culture-specific and thereby verbally defined, if physiologically implemented, mode of being and *sense of self*. (54)

All this is to say that Wynter postulates that culture and sociality have direct impacts on the matter of the mind by way of activating the neurochemical processes that encode our subjective experiences of what is good for us and what is bad for us. According to Wynter's elaboration of Fanon's sociogenic principle, this entails not only colonization of the body, but colonization of the mind itself by way of consistent regulation from external stimuli that become organically, objectively engrained in the brain matter. And though her theory takes colonization and the construction of race as means to dominate and control as primary, this line of argumentation via neurobiology applies to everyone, albeit differently and to different degrees.⁴ We can therefore begin to understand why the desire to locate oneself in an ancient past, at least on the part of some transgender people, emerges as a means of political narration. However, that desire may come from a different source, or a different kind of inherited history or relationship to colonization, because not all transgender people subjectively experience both their gender and their place in a racial, colonial hierarchy as archetypically "bad," as Wynter, following Fanon, notes the Black middle-class subject does.

This sociogenic principle, as I have outlined it following Wynter, offers far more with which to think about the Western episteme than I have space to consider. What I am primarily interested in is the fact of her revelation of human beings' hybrid nature. Human beings, per this theory, are necessarily part of both Nature and Culture. The divide between the two proves itself artificial. This entails, I wager, both individual and collective investments in that which is natural, or organically occurring, and that which is cultural, or socially constructed. For my purposes, an engagement with the discovery of a supposedly transgender skeleton should begin with this revelation of human hybridity. By this I mean that if we take this hybridity seriously, we will notice that the reach backward to establish transgender phenomena in the ancient past is both about naturalizing a cultural phenomenon and identity and about rendering culturally relevant a natural object. Put another way, whether transness is culturally instantiated or organically occurring, the interpretation of this skeleton, with its transparently male characteristics and the fact of its interment in female fashion, *as transgender* works to calcify a contemporary, and thoroughly modern, Westernized understanding of an identity.

In locating, both spatially and temporally, transgender in the ancient past through this skeleton, we can see the sociogenic principle at play. That which can be rendered both culturally relevant and naturally occurring is viewed as veridical, and archaeological research, with its investments in history and in science simultaneously, is one means by which something like transgender, which is subject to not only scientific but also historical and cultural debate, can gain legitimacy and inclusion into humanity's narratives of itself. To find transgender in the past might mean that contemporary efforts to delimit which spaces transgender people may access, historical efforts to "correct" transsexuality through therapeutic rather than somatic interventions, and current negative, if not oppressive, attitudes toward transgenderism go against the very grain of history. And historicity's logic, that we can measure whether mankind has actualized its "truth" and its inner forces of spirit by looking backward to write the species into a narrative of progress, would decry contemporaneous refusals to learn from the ancient past where systems of sex/gender/sexuality in excess of a contemporary gender binary not only existed, but were arguably celebrated or at least accepted. In the current moment in the United States, it is understandable that some trans people, and some of them scholars, would find it both heartening and politically useful if transgender phenomena could be established as global and universal. It seems that the reach backward does more

to shore up who or what counts as trans contemporarily than it does to evidence, and thereby validate, trans identities, bodies, or remains in ancient worlds. And to paraphrase and reiterate Madi Day's point, contemporary validation of transgender identity often relies upon Indigenous and historically and culturally specific sex and gender systems that colonizers attempted to stamp out (Day 2020). This raises the question that even if ancient transgenderism existed, who benefits when it is discovered and celebrated? And do these discoveries break down or reinforce contemporary, racialized hierarchies of who and what counts as transgender?

On the Matter of the Flesh and the Flesh of the Matter

In this penultimate section I turn to Spillers's work in order to gesture toward an alternative intellectual genealogy with which trans studies could engage. In fact, Black trans studies and trans of color critique have begun to flesh out what it would mean for contemporary analysis of transgender life to begin with Spillers and other Black feminist scholarship rather than continuing to center the 1950s and the medicalization or transness-as-transsexuality (Bey 2017; Green and Bey 2017; Ellison et al. 2017; Snorton 2017; Bey 2019; Gill-Peterson 2018; Chaudry 2020). My intent in this final section is not to advance the field that is already emerging at the intersection of Black studies and transgender studies, but rather to gesture toward what an engagement with Spillers, a central figure of Black feminist thought, would enable in the broadest sense of the field of trans studies, and indeed in trans political life. Will the same questions, such as the one that is my focus here on the stakes of claiming that ancient sex and gender systems can prove transgenderism is omnipresent through time and space, still matter once the field shifts to take seriously the simultaneity of racialization and gender-formation?

Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (Spillers 1987), has become a cornerstone for Black feminist thought. In fact, it has been commemorated on the twentieth anniversary of its original publication in a conversation among several Black feminist thinkers and Spillers herself about the lasting impact the work has had on Black feminist theory (Spillers et al. 2007). However, it has arguably received less attention outside of Black feminist circles, even though it takes up ethnic studies and women's studies in the 1980s when these inter-disciplines were institutionalizing in colleges and universities through the establishment of academic programs and departments across the United States. Rather than speculating about why the piece hasn't been taken up in broader academic circles, I want to begin to answer its call to reconsider the very episteme of feminist thought, especially feminist history, in light of the impact that the ungendered female had on the formation of sex/gender systems in slavery and its afterlives. I am not shifting focus from trans historicity, elaborated through a 5,000-year-old skeleton, to focus on feminist or women's history. However, I am considering how both projects would take gender as their object of historical analysis and how that analytical framework relies upon enslaved Black women's positionality in plantation slavery. I do not mean to suggest that transgender history should necessarily be related to, much less that it is derivative of, feminist and women's history. I do, however, hypothesize that because the latter chronologically precedes the former in terms of its institutionalization and emergence upon the proverbial scene, those of us interested in trans history would do well to learn from the mistakes that have already been made in feminist historical analyses. What follows then is an outlining of how Spillers theorizes bodies and flesh, the process and fact of ungendering,

and (the remains of) sexual difference. My goal is, as in previous sections, to critically examine the impetus for a reach backward to recuperate or to confabulate a transgender subject before transgender emerges linguistically and culturally. But in this section, a secondary goal is also to gesture toward a project of transgender studies that takes seriously the figure of the ungendered female and Spillers's hieroglyphics of the flesh for how they might complicate even such radical endeavors as a transgender theory of sexual difference.⁵ Finally, the intervention I make here is not novel. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* is arguably the first monograph to explicitly work at this nexus of history, trans studies, and Spillers, and I do not pretend to advance his claims here (Snorton 2017).⁶ Instead, I orient myself toward trans history as a problematic in order to unpack the desires for a global, universal phenomenon of transgenderism as, perhaps, an echo of similar desires found within queer and feminist theory. Such a deployment of Spillers might help us to understand the importance of the time and place of slavery and its afterlives.

In part I of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers contends, under the conditions of "a willful and violent . . . severing of the captive body from its motive will," that "we lose at least gender difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (in Spillers 2003, 206). In this contention Spillers suggests that gender difference must necessarily be understood differently from sexual difference because gender difference would have been, prior to this severing, instantiated in the delimiting of free will and active desire to (European) men and not (European) women. This means that even as the bodies themselves do not change vis-à-vis sexual difference, insofar as she claims there is a female body and a male body, neither the enslaved man nor the enslaved woman had access or recourse to their active desire under New World conditions, and thereby there were no means by which to determine or delimit gender difference. She goes on to highlight that the captive body becomes subject to "externally imposed meanings and uses," including the fact of being "reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor," and the fact that "in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a *physical* and *biological* expression of 'otherness'" (206). Thus, the subjection of the captive body to the will of the master allows for an elaboration of difference that does not rely solely on sexual *or* gender difference. This is to say that because the captive body provided a physical referent for otherness, difference becomes inflected with race and gender rather than merely gender. This instantiation of racialized-gendered difference works to ungender the enslaved female as we see in parts II, III, and IV of the essay.

Before coming to fully understand how captive bodies, both male and female, come to stand in for both physical and biological difference, we must attend to Spillers's structuring of flesh and body. She insists upon a distinction between the body and the flesh and "impose[s] that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions" (206). Further, she says that "Before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography" (206). Flesh, then, precedes the body insofar as it is the matter of which bodies are made, and it is the irreducible material without which there is no body. The flesh is therefore the point of contact for the "calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet," which necessarily mark the flesh. Spillers avers that "these undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (207). This hieroglyphics of the flesh

constitutes the captive body and thereby is occluded by the recognition of the captive body as a Black one. This is to say that because flesh precedes the body, when it is thus marked by such hieroglyphics from the fact of the overseer's or the master's brutality, the captive body cannot be understood to be like the liberated one. The racialized-gendered difference rendered into hieroglyphics calcifies, in the flesh and thereby the body, the distinction between captive and liberated subject positions, between slaves and masters.

In confluence with Wynter's elaboration upon Fanon's sociogeny, Spillers queries whether "this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moment?" (207). And indeed, more recent scholarship on epigenetics would support her suggestion that such trauma is passed down biologically, genetically, *physically*. She then points to the failure of ethnic studies to account for this phenomenon, which we might call epigenetic or sociogenetic, claiming that "flesh is the concentration of 'ethnicity' that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away" (207). Thus, ethnic studies, which, by definition, takes ethnicity as its object of analysis, relies upon the disavowal of the marked flesh in order to query the body, even as that body may be rendered other otherwise. Finally, she turns to the failure of women's studies "to realize that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males" (207). This failure stems from an accounting of violence against women that hinged upon rape as the violation or threat thereof that constituted women's subjection. If the category "women" came to stand in for "gender" and the analysis of it in this iteration of feminist criticism, then an understanding of gender that centralized rape as an interiorized violation does not even begin to address the totality of the conditions of life under slavery for the enslaved female. Spillers thus argues "this materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of *female flesh 'ungendered'*—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations" (207, my emphasis). It is this ungendering that I want to underscore as the condition for reorganizing sex/gender systems under plantation slavery and its afterlives. Until women's studies or feminist thought in the United States has contended with this ungendering, our inherited theories of gender attest universality under false pretenses.

To return to the question of reaching backward to unearth our transgender skeleton in the Copper Age, we could consider the fact that female flesh ungendered remains largely unattended to in contemporary feminist philosophy, even as it has begun to gain traction in many spaces within trans studies. It is perhaps safe to say that much of the theorizing about transgender contends with normative understandings of sex and gender and represents transgender as in excess of or antithetical to those systems of understanding. If this is the case, then the appeal of ungendering, as a concept, should be evident. However, ethical engagement with Spillers's contention that the female slave was ungendered requires a recognition that the ungendering happens not as a result of the will but precisely because of its denial. This is to say that ungendering could be an important concept for transgender studies, but it would need to attend to the dynamics of domination and subjection that structurally positioned the enslaved female *outside* of gender even as those dynamics demanded the use of her sex for the literal reproduction of the system of slavery. What this means for those of us interested in theories of transness is that our theories of gender are incomplete

until they necessarily contend with the centrality of chattel slavery in reorganizing sex and gender to incorporate racialized/gendered difference. And not only are our theories incomplete, they would also be strengthened by proper contention with what Ferreira da Silva terms the analytics of raciality, with Wynter's sociogenic principle, and with Spillers's hieroglyphics of the flesh. Therefore, I argue, we are not yet ready to reach backward or to locate transgender outside of a contemporary moment in which gender itself is entangled with the afterlives of slavery and genocide. What we find when we do reach back are not transgender skeletons, but bones without flesh, the mere outlines and suggestions of bodies, even for all their cultural interpretation within archaeology and the broader social sciences. We are left only with the remains of sexual and gender difference and a continued desire to preserve historical and scientific universality in and through the flipping of the transgender object (of anthropological inquiry) to the transgender subject (of historicity).

Transgender without Bodies, Bones without Flesh

By this point I hope to have demonstrated that though the desire to locate transgender in the past is understandable, even if less so when emanating from nontransgender subjects, the reach backward occludes the contemporary calcification of transgenderism necessary to do so. Working through Ferreira da Silva, we saw that historicity continues to be privileged alongside scientific universality in archaeological research, at least when it insists upon anachronistically announcing the discovery of evidence of transgender in the ancient past. This continued privileging of historical authenticity, or the "truth" of Man's past, neither advances projects of liberation, nor does it escape the haunting that historicity instantiates. And indeed, in this particular instance in which transgender, without a body, is unearthed and discovered in bones without flesh, the scene of regulation and the scene of representation collapse on each other. What, then, are the consequences of a political struggle that relies upon trans historicity uncovered in an ever more ancient past?

Coupling Ferreira da Silva's analysis of historicity with Wynter's sociogenic principle, we began to see that the impetus for that desire comes from our hybrid nature as human beings, that is, of being equally a part of nature and a part of culture. Without the recognition that nature and culture are necessarily mutually constitutive, we lose the capacity to understand the origins of the motivation to find transgender in the ancient past. Put another way, there is no transgender skeleton without a specific desire, whether it emanates from anthropological inquiry into trans subjectivities or from trans people themselves, to naturalize transgender and render it culturally defensible. Last, I began to unpack the necessary disruption into trans studies that proper attention to Spillers's contention that the enslaved woman represented female flesh ungendered entails. A project oriented toward theorizing or historicizing transgender subjectivity must attend to the ways in which contemporary understandings of systems of sex, gender, and sexuality were necessarily organized by the conditions of domination in chattel slavery and reorganized time and again in its afterlives.

As a budding scholar interested in transgender history and in the interplay between the sciences and the humanities, I remain optimistic, despite the tone of this article, that research into trans historicities is viable and useful. But as a white transgender woman who reads Black feminist thought, I am well aware that the fraught nature of Black-white relations always already informs analyses of other differences between humans that are inflected with social power, like gender. For this reason, I have sought to unpack

not just *the desire to unearth evidence of transgenderism through the ages, but my own desires to see myself in an ancient past.* I hope that I have hesitated on the desire itself and tried to discern where it comes from without dismissing that desire as either necessarily colonial or decidedly devoid of coloniality. Ultimately, I query what trans historicity might look like if it is organized not through a singular lens that promiscuously claims various historical figures or even entire cultures as “trans,” not unlike Leslie Feinberg’s *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Feinberg 1996), but rather through a broader lens that thinks not just universality, but also particularity and respects the needs of both.

Last, I recognize that the intervention I make with this article can be read as a critique of the broadest version of the field of transgender studies at the expense of scholarship by and for trans people of color. My hope is that my contribution can help to bridge trans of color critique with the parts of trans studies that eschew vital discussions of race. If trans studies is often read against the grain of queer theory (Chu and Drager 2019; Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin 2020; Keegan 2020), then perhaps it can avoid some of the same mistakes for which queer theory has been critiqued, such as its reliance on people of color and their bodies to shore up white queer identity as antinormative or subversive (Ferguson 2004). And though my focus has been on the ancient past and what archaeology, and trans studies, want from a “transgender skeleton,” I urge readers to pose these same questions to themselves when studying more recent historical figures as well. Finally, I encourage readers to consider whether and how the material conditions of transgender life are changed by transgender skeletons, or indeed other historical figures and discoveries we might feel compelled to claim as trans.

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Notes

¹ For more on this, see Emery 2011; Hawks 2011; Killgrove 2011. These posts are not necessarily useful for understanding my argument, but can give helpful context for the kind of outcry that came from archaeologists, and the kind of flattening reading that I want to eschew.

² For more, see Rservern 2013. It was also a topic of discussion on tranifesto.com, which is now defunct, but the entry in question is block-quoted in the link in Rservern 2013. In this pre-tipping-point moment, it is quite understandable that trans people may want to latch onto this discovery, a desire that is totally glossed over by the largely cisgender anthropologists outraged at the historical inaccuracy or anachronism of calling this skeleton anything other than simply male.

³ I am wary of naming all three of these scholars as feminist on the grounds that Wynter in particular, in conversation with Katherine McKittrick, argues for a humanism made to the measure of the world, not a feminism. Yet I also take the risk here for the sake of contextualizing their work for an audience in philosophy who may not be familiar enough with them to properly situate why each of these scholars may or may not define themselves or their work as feminist. And indeed, the argument I make in this article by putting them in conversation in this way is about what trans studies and feminist philosophy could learn by tracing a different genealogy through Black feminist thought rather than through a predominantly white canon.

⁴ It's worth noting here that race and gender do not operate in the same way. The scholars I think with in this piece articulate the ways in which gender is racialized, and vice versa. However, I want to clarify that this elaboration of Wynter's reading of neurobiology is not intended to imply that the points she makes about the neurochemical work that colonization does on the brain affects everyone in the same way. I read Wynter's argument here as a universal one, but one that is articulated primarily through the specificity of the subjective experience of having been colonized. For work that teases out the specificity of the entanglement of gender and race in the case of transness and the ethics, if not outright politics, of changing sex, see Heyes 2006.

⁵ Here I am thinking of Talia Bettcher's work for the ways in which she reads feminist theories of the body and sexual difference in and through a transgender studies lens. See Bettcher 2014.

⁶ See especially chapter 2 of Snorton 2017: "Trans Capable: Fungibility, Fugitivity, and the Matter of Being" for his brilliant reading of passing and cross-dressing during the plantation slavery era in and through Spillers's concept of ungendering.

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