

Capacity

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A capacity is both an “active power or force” and an “ability to receive or maintain; holding power.”¹ A capacity manifests its power as potentiality, incipience, and imminence. Only when exercised do capacities become fully apparent, and they may lie in wait to be activated.

Transgender capacity is the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple. It can be located or discerned in texts, objects, cultural forms, situations, systems, and images that support an interpretation or recognition of proliferative modes of gender nonconformity, multiplicity, and temporality. In other words, transgender capacity is the trait of those many things that support or demand accounts of gender’s dynamism, plurality, and expansiveness.

The dimorphic model of sex and the binary account of gender—not to mention the assertion of their static natures—are never adequate ways of knowing the sophisticated and divergent modes of existence people enact. Such strictures always encode their own possibilities for collapse and deconstruction, and transgender capacity erupts at those moments when such reductive norms do not hold.

in "Postposttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First Century Transgender Studies," special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.1-2 (May 2014): 47-49

The most important feature of transgender capacity is that it can be an unintended effect of many divergent decisions and conditions. That is, a transgender critique can be demanded of a wide range of texts, sites, systems, and objects—including those that would at first seem unrelated to transgender concerns and potentialities. A capacity need not be purposefully planted or embedded (though of course it may be), and it does not just result from the intentions of sympathetic or self-identified transgendered subjects. It may emerge at any site where dimorphic and static understandings of gender are revealed as arbitrary and inadequate. Transgender phenomena can be generated from a wide range of positions and competing (even antagonistic) subjects, and it is important to recognize that a transgender hermeneutic can and should be pursued at all such capacitating sites.

The usefulness of this concept is primarily methodological and is meant as a tool for resisting the persistent erasure of the evidence of transgender lives, gender diversity, nondimorphism, and successive identities. Its questions are valid to many areas of scholarly inquiry, including such different fields as biology, sociology, and economics. It is a retort to charges of anachronism and a reminder to search widely for the nascence of transgender critique. With regard to historical analysis, transgender capacity poses particularly urgent questions, since it is clear that there is a wealth of gender variance and nonconformity that has simply not been registered in the historical record. Without projecting present-day understandings of transgender identities into the past, one must recognize and make space for all of the ways in which self-determined and successive genders, identities, and bodily morphologies have always been present throughout history as possibilities and actualities.² Dimorphic and static definitions of gender and sexual difference obscure such diversity and facilitate the obliteration of the complex and infinitely varied history of gender nonconformity and strategies for survival. To recognize transgender capacity is not to equate all episodes of potential but rather to allow the recognition of their particularity and to resist the normative presumptions that have enforced their invisibility.

Transgender epistemologies and theoretical models fundamentally remap the study of human cultures. Their recognition of the mutable and multiple conditions of the apparatus we know as gender has wide-ranging consequences. That is, once gender is understood to be temporal, successive, or transformable, all accounts of human lives look different and more complex. It would be a mistake to limit this powerful epistemological shift to clearly identifiable trans topics and histories. While transgender subjects and experience must remain central and defining, the lessons of transgender critique demand to be applied expansively.

Across the disciplines, there is much evidence of the limitations of static and dimorphic models of genders, identities, and relations. One must search for and be attentive to transgender capacities in both expected and unexpected places. Tracking them is a hermeneutical rather than an iconographic task, and the conceptual space of gender transformability erupts anywhere that dimorphism is questioned, mutability becomes a value, or self-creation becomes a possibility. While they are most readily located in the study of the representation of human bodies and experiences, transgender capacities can be located in such topics as abstract art, rhetorical forms, digital cultures, technologies of complex systems, economic ecologies, and histories of scientific discovery. In these areas and beyond, there are innumerable forms and modes of transgender capacity still to be found, imagined, or realized.

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Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “capacity,” accessed December 16, 2013, www.oed.com.
2. An important statement of the problem and a defining methodological position on addressing it (to which this account of transgender capacity is indebted) is J. Jack Halberstam’s discussion of “perverse presentism” in *Female Masculinity* (1998: 50–59).

Reference

Halberstam, J. Jack. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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