

Ask a Feminist: Susan Stryker Discusses Trans Studies, Trans Feminism, and a More Trans Future with V Varun Chaudhry

V Varun Chaudhry (VVC): This is *Signs*' very exciting series, "Ask a Feminist," and we're really excited to have Susan Stryker here with us today. I'm V Varun Chaudhry. I'm on the faculty at Brandeis University and a big fan of your work, Susan, so thank you so much for being here. [I'm] especially excited. You do so much representational labor for the field of transgender studies, and I and many other transgender studies scholars are incredibly grateful for that work. So thank you for doing this and for doing so many other things. I've seen your face and your voice on so many different platforms. I really appreciate your saying yes to this and being a part of this exciting interview today.

Susan Stryker (SS): Thank you so much for having me here. I love doing this kind of work, and thanks for all the kind words. Could you, like, scratch a little lower and to the left please? [*laughter*]

VVC: I'd love for us to focus on three themes really. Starting with really thinking about transgender studies as it's grown over the last twenty-some-odd years (we can extend that to even further before that, if we count various texts from the sixties to today). So, talking about the growth of the field in your eyes, and then moving into thinking about that relationship to feminism as you see it: academic feminism, political feminism, the various places where those meet. And then, finally, thinking about transgender studies and trans feminism today. . . . How it's relevant, why we need it, and continue to need it today.

I'll start by asking you: How does it feel to see the ways that trans studies has grown? And how do you see it having grown since, I'm thinking, 1998, when you did the transgender issue for *GLQ*, which was one of the first times we see trans studies, and even before that we can think of "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" (Stryker 1994), one of the first times someone talked about being trans in an academic article. So, how have you seen things grow and change over the years?

SS: Wow, those are great questions. So, what I would say, I would easily push the quote-unquote “beginnings” of trans studies back even a little earlier than “My Words to Victor Frankenstein” because I very much thought of that piece as kind of an answer, as in a call-and-response form, to work that I had been reading. Notably, Sandy Stone’s really amazing article “Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1992) and Leslie Feinberg’s impassioned *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (1992), as well as Kate Bornstein’s work onstage. There just seemed to be this moment in the early nineties where trans-*whatever* became differently possible. A lot of the discourse on transness up until that point I found to be very pathologizing and very excluding. And something happened in that queer moment of the early nineties that made a different kind of trans discourse possible, where it became possible to speak as trans—and not just to speak as trans but to have both embodied and experiential knowledge as well as academic and more formal kinds of knowledge.

And I really see the opportunity to talk differently about trans, building really directly on feminisms of color . . . thinking about the shift of the early nineties that gives us trans studies proper as a “theory in the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981, 23) . . . that you know some things because of how you move through the world as well as all of your schoolbook learning. I just felt really fortunate that I was around in the early 1990s, that I had the privilege of being at UC Berkeley. In the years between [Michel] Foucault dying and Judith Butler arriving, there was this really amazing conversation going on in the interdisciplinary humanities and cultural studies at Berkeley that I think very much gave me the background to think theoretically about some of the stuff that I was living as a trans person. That was a very exciting moment in the early 1990s, when it became possible in a new way to talk about transness and to bring it into a different kind of conversation with critical scholarship and politics on gender and race and ethnicity and class. I would say trans studies started in the early nineties, as you mention. Of course, there’s work before then, but that shift toward a different kind of language game about transness I very much date to that early nineties moment. And I just happened to be there to start jamming in the jam session. It wasn’t anything that I created—it was an emerging possibility that I just happened to be present for.

VVC: That’s really interesting. And thank you for mentioning those other texts; of course, Sandy Stone, Leslie Feinberg, and Kate Bornstein were writing to and for public audiences as well. Follow-up question for you: Thinking of that moment in the early nineties, how did you see the relationship between transness in the academy, or what was becoming transness in

the academy, and being trans in the world? What did that relationship look like? Sometimes today I think we see a lag in one place or the other. Maybe we see the academy is having conversations: “Oh, we don’t need to talk about that anymore, that conversation isn’t relevant.” Then, in real activist spaces and community spaces, people are having different conversations. Did you experience that kind of disconnect? Or did it feel like this is a different moment?

SS: It was a different moment, and there was a disconnect. I was involved in a lot of cultural and political activism in the San Francisco queer scene, broadly defined. And I remember as I was first transitioning, as I was coming out in an academic space and starting to position myself as someone who could address “this trans thing” we saw happening in the streets . . . I have this one really clear memory of giving a talk at Berkeley, when Berkeley was in the process of setting up its queer studies program—for lack of a better word, it ultimately became a minor in LGBT studies—but some of those early conversations, I was giving this talk and was chit-chatting with other academics who were there, and someone mentioned that there was a job coming up in the gender studies program at a nearby university—one of the other UCs—and I said, “Oh, I should apply for that.” And this woman cut me a look and said, “Dressed like that? I don’t think so,” because I was presenting in a feminine manner. And so it’s like, wow, you’re basically saying that I’m not the kind of person who can have a job in the academy. And you still see that. I’d say being trans is a great BS detector: when you walk into a room you find things out about people that you perhaps did not expect. People you might not know, but looked up to intellectually, you really like their work, you find out that they’re not particularly cool on the “trans thing.” They might be talking the talk in a way that makes you think they will be an ally, and then you find out they’ve got some blind spot around transness that you didn’t even know. I will say it’s been a two-edged sword; it’s been a “both and” kind of experience of watching a different conversation on transness emerge in the early nineties, to go through three or maybe four iterations of that conversation over the past twenty-five years or more and, at the same time, still encountering a lot of really entrenched, unconscious, invisibilized, unacknowledged, let’s just call it structural transphobia.

VVC: Absolutely. And certainly the BS detector is a very real thing for institutions as well—we see the kind of lack of understanding [of] how to read a person whose name might look different from what’s on an ID document, or what’s on a tax form, and those kinds of things [are] coming up all of the time. I’m sure any kind of trans person working in any kind of institution

can understand. And the academy is no exception to that. That's really interesting and certainly not something that's shifted even as we have more and more language to describe trans and transness, thanks in large part to the work you've shepherded in, especially with *TSQ*. So, I'd love to hear more about the birth of *TSQ* as a journal, the growth of it, and I know there have been changes in the editorship lately. That's really exciting to see. It's grown so much into its own life world as a public venue. What has that been like for you? What have you seen and what do you see as the most exciting components of *TSQ*?

SS: First of all, I agree, it was a totally exciting thing to launch. My own thinking, as you mentioned, I edited my own special issue of an academic journal on trans studies for *GLQ* back in 1998, and there was similar work happening that other scholars were doing, Stephen Whittle in the United Kingdom had done a special issue of a journal (see Whittle 1998), and there'd been a few more. It was about a decade later—maybe 2007 or 2008—I was invited by my friend and colleague Paisley Currah to be one of the coeditors of a special issue of *WSQ* on trans. And we did that. When we put out the call for papers, it was going to be a double issue. We could publish like twelve-ish articles, and we received more than two hundred abstract submissions. And that was the moment that we went, “There's a field here.” There is far more work than we can publish, and it's just time to have our own venue. So we started working, and we got that issue out into the world (see Stryker and Currah 2008), and I guess it'd be around 2009 or 2010 that we started pitching the idea of *TSQ*. I won't go into all of the ins and outs and all of the ups and downs of doing that. We had approached one publisher who we thought go with it, and then we got some very, I would say transphobic, reader reports back from it, and they got cold feet. And then we went to Duke, which, honestly, had been my first choice anyway because I really saw what we were doing as being compatible with Duke's journals. And Duke was all over it. It's been a dream working with them. They gave us the green light in 2013, our first issue came out in 2014, and I am so proud of the fact that we learned last year that *TSQ* is the journal that got to profitability the fastest of any Duke title, it had the most citations of any Duke journal, it just really succeeded. We launched it well.

The other thing that Paisley and I talked about in the very beginning that we both recognized: that we were two white, tenured, senior scholars in our fields, and we were really wanting the journal to be more representative and inclusive and expansive than our perspectives. But, we also found that there were not a lot of younger scholars and scholars of color who had the bandwidth right at that moment to take on the heavy lifting of getting a journal

launched and edited. So, we said to ourselves, “We’re the people who have the capacity to do this right now. We’re going to make a commitment, though, as we develop the journal and turn over the editorship, we’re really committed in turning it over to a majority of color editorial board, and a majority trans-femme, trans woman board, because it’s a very underrepresented constituency.” And we did that! It took us seven years. Paisley bowed out a little bit earlier than I did due to other obligations, but we’d recruited and cultivated and mentored a younger trans-of-color scholar, Francisco J. Galarte, who took over Paisley’s position. And then, as I’ve started working on my own “exit strategy,” I like to say I’ve promoted myself to irrelevance, to executive editor, and I don’t have responsibility for individual issues anymore. And we were able to bring in Grace Lavery, from UC Berkeley, and Jules Gill-Peterson, from the University of Pittsburgh, and the person who’d been the graduate assistant all along, Abraham B. Weil (I was Abe’s dissertation director), and when *TSQ* got greenlit, it was like, Abe, I’ll use my money for hiring you as a research assistant and have you be the managing editor for *TSQ*. So Abe has been at the journal since the beginning, and now that he’s a professor in his own right, he moved up to the editorial board, and we’ve now set up this process. It’s a trans-of-color- and trans-femme-majority board with a succession plan for how the most senior person rotates off and the next most senior person steps up to the executive editor position. So I will be officially on the board through 2023, which will be the tenth anniversary of the journal, and I think that will be a good place to exit. I call myself—half-jokingly—the resident “granny tranny” for the journal. I’m the person who will keep some of the institutional memory, I’m the person who does more of the liaising with the press, but I increasingly step back and make room for the people who have become the editor to do more of the public-facing work and to do more of the intellectual work of curating special themes and actually doing the editing of the journal. We did decide two years ago that we wanted to launch something more public, something like—the model I had in mind was this great website called *Jadaliyya* on North African and Middle Eastern studies that’s a great mix of journalism and scholarship and short pieces and hot takes, and I thought, “Yeah, we should do something like that for trans studies.” It’s been a little slower rollout than we had hoped for; COVID threw a monkey wrench in many people’s plans, but we are starting to build that out so we have even more turf, so to speak, for publishing work of interest in trans studies. It’s been a pretty exciting project to be involved in.

VVC: It’s been neat to see it evolve. The first issue came out while I was starting grad school, so it was kind of a marker for me too, of, “Oh my gosh,

I can actually make this my work!” Thinking queer studies and queer-of-color critique and seeing trans studies emerge as a really institutionalized field—there can be a journal that I could publish in, there can be job calls calling for trans studies scholars, this can be something I can do and imagine for myself. Which also meant I can imagine being trans in the academy. It’s really beautiful to see and to hear from you how that unfolded from your end, from that behind-the-scenes perspective. And it seems like a deeply feminist leadership model too.

SS: I hope so, I hope so. We intended it to be such.

VVC: And with that, I would love to hear how you think about the relationship between trans studies and academic feminism. *Signs* sees itself as a frontier feminist journal, and we think about feminist studies as very interdisciplinary and intersectional, and trans studies is really a part of that. I’m interested to hear from you, how you think about the relationship between trans studies and feminist studies. I’m thinking of the “Queering the Woman Question” essay you wrote way back when (Stryker 2007). What does that look like today? What are the conversations that you see that are exciting? What are the themes that you see across these fields that are interesting and that are lively today?

SS: A two-part answer to that question: The first is kind of a tangent—I would just say that the thing that I see in trans studies right now that I’m actually most excited about is the emergence in the last couple of years of a really powerful, robust trans-of-color critique . . . in some ways, kind of paralleling the emergence of queer-of-color critique after some of the earlier canonical, the Eve Sedgwick, the Michael Moon versions of queer studies. You had José Muñoz and Rod Ferguson—people like that coming in and saying, “Actually you need to deal with race a little differently.” And I see the same thing happening in trans studies. In spite of the really well-intentioned efforts of a mostly white-centric body of scholarship that emerged in the 1990s, over the last few years, [there’s] the attention particularly to Black trans studies and the idea that Blackness has a transness of its own that’s not necessarily a gendered transness. That Blackness has trans qualities in it as well and to make that move and just to decenter the whiteness of transness—I’ll say has just been the most intellectually and politically exciting development in the field. And I say [in response to] your question about the relationship between trans studies and feminist studies, I feel like trans studies has always had an explicitly feminist take on gender, that it basically says—that it says to queer studies, “Yeah, it’s queer, but we’re critiquing the cis-centric bias of sexual-orientation models to really think about how

queer can be more than a five-letter word for ‘homo.’ You really need to deal with the trans element here.” I always thought it was like an internal critique.

The same with feminism—like “Yes, I’m totally down for a politics of critiquing and dismantling unjust and oppressive social hierarchies predicated on notions of sex and gender.” And then to say, “But the woman question only gets us so far. Gender is more complicated than that. There’s nonbinary and trans approaches to gender; gender oppression just doesn’t happen to like the subordinated term of a binary gender model.” So how do you really take feminism seriously and say, “Gender is more complicated than certain versions of feminism have made out; how do we really hold feminist scholarship accountable to the lived experiential complexity of gender and how it’s organized within our society?”

So, I think of trans studies as implicitly feminist, and I am just, kind of appalled at the state of the conversation in feminism more broadly construed about transness. I think the resurgence of an explicitly transphobic feminism in the last few years is really dangerous. I think I’ve been kind of naive; of course as a historian and also as a person of a certain number of years, number of laps around the sun, it’s like I remember the explicit, really unchecked feminist transphobia that gained a lot of traction in the 1980s. And I had just assumed that was, you know, reactionary and revanchist and it would fade away over time as new generations of feminists emerged. And when we started to see this resurgence in this transphobic strain of feminism around 2014, which was the year we launched *TSQ*, that was the year that Sheila Jeffreys’s book *Gender Hurts* came out. And we talked about it at *TSQ*; we thought, “How should we address this?” And the sense of the editorial advisory board was, “Don’t engage with it directly. You’re just going to give fuel to the fire. It’s best to either ignore it or reframe it.” And that was where our Trans/Feminisms special issue (Stryker and Bettcher 2016) came from. It was like, okay, rather than take on this so-called TERF [trans-exclusionary radical feminist] feminism directly, we’ll just [ask], “What kind of feminist work and trans work are happening at the intersection of trans feminism? What’s going on out there?” And I think the issue that came out of that question was really powerful. I think that’s one of our strongest issues. But I think it was naive in the sense that the transphobic feminist position has just increasingly gained ground. And I think it has made very strange political bedfellows with really virulent reactionary forms of ethnonationalist populism. It’s shocking to see people who you think of as leftist or liberal feminist academics saying words that could come out of the mouth of Viktor Orbán in Hungary—this conspiracy theory that gender ideology is somehow something that nefarious trans people have foisted on the world in an effort to harm women and girls. I find it about as persuasive and as scary as QAnon;

it's a conspiratorial way of thinking that imagines trans women in particular as a kind of phantasm. Like the antisemitic trope of the Jew as the internal invader of society who is secretly manipulating things. That idea of the trans person as the conspiratorial, let's just say bogeyman: it has no basis in reality, and yet the existence of that fantasy will have material effects. I just think we're in a really dangerous moment right now in watching the conscription and enlistment in certain forms of reactionary feminism for these very pernicious ethnonationalist political agendas. I think that we're seeing it most strongly in the United Kingdom. I think in the United Kingdom, the public discourse on transness is a full-on moral panic right now. And I do think that we need to find a way, using the intellectual tools that come out of trans scholarship, to disrupt the transmission of that very pernicious conspiratorial way of thinking about transness.

VVC: Absolutely. Thank you for that answer. You touched on both the ways trans studies is very much and will always be indebted to feminist genealogies, and I think we can, like you said, really specifically say Black and women-of-color feminist genealogies have really been invested in critiquing womanhood as something that's supposed to always look one way. Even if that's the initial idea behind some of woman-of-color feminist, Black feminist conversations.

SS: Just to jump in on that, it's like, I just take great solace and inspiration in the "Combahee River Collective Statement" (1981) that explicitly says however critical we are of patriarchy, we can't ground that in a biological notion of maleness. And that to take that position as women who have been oppressed through biologicistic notions of race, that's very powerful. I think a lot too about Sylvia Wynter's work (see, e.g., McKittrick 2015) and the way that she writes about the biocentric ordering of the world that is one of the afterlives of the transatlantic slave trade. And there's a way of thinking about the meaning of bodily difference that is so embedded in histories of colonialism and racism. You can't separate out that question of how feminism has been predicated on certain biological notions of femaleness that don't fully account for the range of possibilities for how gender can be oppressive because it's still rooted in that biocentric model. To the extent that trans studies has a radical political potential, I think it's in articulating and manifesting how it is that we have, as living people, a capacity to change the signification of embodiment. That transness essentially says that the body can signify otherwise than what you think: we can make it mean something else. And that is a really deep ontological and epistemological kind of work, as well as political work and imaginative work. And it's in that moment, I think, of saying "my

body can mean otherwise” that trans studies is in deep dialogue with processes of decolonization, of racial justice, of anti-global capitalism . . . that it becomes a part of an overthrowing and reimagining of how these very pernicious systems of power root themselves in our flesh. And we say we can actually—not wholly because we’re not omniscient, omnipotent people; you can’t just overthrow an existing order of the world—but you can say, working from where I am located, I am going to do the work of liberating myself to the extent that I can and build a different kind of community rooted in a different vision, a different practice, that ultimately can become a form of sociogenesis, of making a new people.

VVC: Absolutely. And again, a deeply feminist and Black feminist principle too. And one that is lived out in a different way than maybe we would imagine when we hear “feminism” sometimes, which I think is what can be really beautiful about trans feminism as a project, and Black trans studies, and Black trans feminist projects too. And thinking about my own work, I’ve written about the relationship between trans studies and Black feminism and the potential of a marriage of those fields. So, I’m excited to hear you speaking to that really specifically with the texts you mentioned and in a project of a radical self-love and a reclaiming of the body outside of these categories that get glued onto us in ways that feel hard to shake off in order to find freedom in some way. So, thank you for that answer.

I think that’s a pretty natural segue to thinking about this current moment, right? Where we’re in a global racial reckoning—we’ve been in one—but [it feels] especially real in this moment. We’re all in our homes (if we have them), and we’re seeing a lot of things actively fall apart in front of us because of the white supremacy that built those things. And we’re seeing a pandemic that’s killing off people, many people of color, Black and Latinx communities being really highly affected by this. What do you see as trans studies, or, we could even say, a kind of trans-feminist political project (maybe that’s two different answers)? What’s the urgency of those, in this current moment, given the ways we’re seeing things collapse? Maybe it’s a great thing that they’re collapsing—I’d argue for the most part it is—but also, what solace can we find in trans studies—and trans feminism, in your opinion?

SS: Well, big questions. I hope this doesn’t sound like a cop-out, but I really feel like part of what I think of as a trans aesthetic, or a trans critical method, is to always say, “it’s *both and* and *neither nor* and *either this or that*.” It’s like all three logical operations happening at the same time. And so, to focus on the *both and* question, I think on the one side, it is really important for trans studies to keep carving out spaces of what I’d call “legitimated forms of

knowledge production” within the academy. So, there’s critical conversations here, there’s historiography, there’s deep citational trails, there’s robust conversations that are connected to other really important conversations, and you know—trans studies, it’s a thing. I want to keep doing that work because I do think it’s something that can be useful. It’s not the be-all end-all; it’s not the only way to do work, but it creates a useful tool. It helps people get jobs, it helps people build up their publication records, it helps build up a body of scholarship that can be taught to students who need to learn about issues they’re dealing with in their own life. It’s good. I have no ambivalence about the process of institutionalization for trans studies. I just see it as a way of accessing whatever resources are available in the institution of higher education and making it available to people who need it.

And on the other hand, I think of what this moment calls for, this moment of pandemic, of resurgent white supremacist and racist fantasy and mobilization, of really violent forms of oppression and death being meted out to all kinds of minoritized others. I think that the economic crisis and the environmental crisis—it’s just like we’re in these Russian nesting dolls of crisis right now. It’s just not enough to develop a specialist form of knowledge within the academy. In addition to that, partly what I feel myself and also what I see happening among a lot of peers both within the academy and outside it is a newfound desire and willingness and ability to just speak as trans in this way that’s almost oracular. It’s kind of like saying, “I, as a trans person, am going to drop some truth on you from my perspective. I am going to speak truth to power.” It is not just about playing the game of incremental reformist change. It’s not even about couching trans struggles in traditional political terms. It’s about articulating and enacting that new sociality. It’s about speaking as trans in public. It’s about building a different kind of community. I hear more and more people talking about their transness in a way that it’s like, you could almost also call it a spirituality. Not necessarily in the sense of a theistic religion kind of spirituality, but a sense of people feeling that through their transness they are in touch with something that is just ontologically given. Their transness is something that the deep complexity of being manifests itself through and comes into the world. And to use that cliché of “who are you to play small with the world and hide your light under a bushel?” I see more and more trans people just being completely unapologetic and powerful and naming and making the world they want to be in with the people they want to be in the world with. And that is something that exceeds mere academia. So, that is the *both and* for me of transness in this moment—building up specialist knowledges and speaking powerfully from a place of your own deep truth.

VVC: Absolutely. I love that, and it makes me think of two things: one thing I'm always thinking about in relationship to transness for me and my community is that refusal to be wedded to any gender category that might describe me now, in the past, or ever. And that sort of temporal rejection of [the idea that] "now that I use these pronouns," "now that I have top surgery," "now that I'm on hormones," I have to live a life in a particular way or do a particular thing. Actually, I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. And that place of freedom makes me think within the academy, the way that you've framed trans studies, in so many different places, is to say "anybody who thinks they're doing trans studies is doing trans studies." And I think that opens up so much space for different kinds of thinking, different kinds of being, in and outside of the academy. It's very exciting.

SS: Well, I hope so. That's the intention, you know. But yeah, I really appreciated what you said there about my own sense, even though I admittedly played a role in helping consolidate or open up a space where a field can happen, I in no way feel like I know what trans studies is. It's kind of like—trans! It's this idea that's out there and people do it! It's like, what are you doing with it? It's a very experimental notion of "here is a concept, what can you do with it?" It's like "Oh look! Somebody is doing something new with it!"

What I'm always looking for, when I'm in my role as an editor, is to find the new thing that people are doing with it. One of my colleagues, micha cárdenas, who teaches at UC Santa Cruz, works on what she calls "algorithmic analysis of trans." She and Jian Neo Chen edited the issue of *TSQ* that you appeared in (cárdenas and Chen 2019), so I'm sure you're familiar with her. But the thing that I like about micha, who uses the asterisk in trans* a lot of the time, she says, "well, the asterisk is like a command code that sort of means 'everything.'" Like you could read trans*, not as like "trans whatever" but as a command, as like "trans everything." And I like that. I like that sense that trans is just a heuristic, or an analytical method, or a conceptual tool that can be [a] standpoint on the world.

VVC: Thank you so much again Susan for joining us for "Ask a Feminist." This was a really exciting conversation, and one I think that *Signs* readers will be really excited to hear about, from the "behind the scenes of *TSQ*" to the visioning and dreaming and hoping for a "more trans" future.

SS: "More trans future"—totally down for that. It was great to chat with you. Thanks for inviting me.

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