

## On *Still* Reading Like a Depressed Transsexual

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Other, additional forms of support, solidarity, and intimacy are needed to grapple with the all-too-common experience of lag—a form of being out of temporal sync, left behind—and the negative affects associated with it.

—Malatino 2019, 639

Frequently, depressed time . . . is characterized by feelings of slowness, delay or stillness arising from a lack of such future orientation.

—Cavaletti and Heimann 2020, 272

Ever since, I have found myself stuck in, around, 2014. To me (and, I think, to many of us who are, for whatever reason, attentive to the rhythms of trans cultures and their representation in the United States), 2014 registered as a transitional moment; one situation gave way to another. This giving way has been narrated in a variety of ways: as an “unprecedented” tip of *trans* into visibility via media and art (Koch-Reid, Haschemi Yekani, and Verlinden 2020, 3); the proclaimed “flourishing” of the academic, interdisciplinary space of transgender studies (Kunzel 2014); the relatively widespread emergence of an intelligible transnormative subject (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013); a welcome ascendancy of informed-consent models in the previously (and in some places presently) heavily gatekept arena of trans health care and the “(incomplete) depathologization of trans identity” (Pyne 2021, 346); and the intensification (a slow drip and then a deluge) of state-level anti-trans legislation, forms of speculator and mundane violence, and the mainstreaming of tacitly white supremacist and explicitly anti-trans rhetorics. Trans scholars and other writers have offered innumerable diagnoses and historicizations of this post-2014 situation, to which I have diminishingly little to add. And yet, each time I sit down to write, I find myself beginning here, as if no time had passed, as if nothing had happened (though much has happened) to fundamentally change the situation or my relation to it. What I’m trying to describe is my (our?) attempt to write both in and about a Berlantian *impasse*, “a space of time lived” without a horizon of expectation, “without a narrative genre . . . a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure” (Berlant 2011, 199).

And so. Way back in academic year 2014–2015, I wrote an essay that would become the central chapter of my dissertation and eventually my first academic book. But first, that chapter was published as the essay “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading Like a Depressed Transsexual,” already years later, in 2017. It was received well, I think, not because it said anything new but because it was received by many as *timely*. That essay was and is about many things, but it is throughout animated by a question about mental disability and (trans) epistemology: How might the cognitive or affective styles of depression allow me to know about the impasse of trans feminism? Or, more precisely, the gambit of that essay was that thinking with (rather than against) the habits of thought and feeling that inhere in depression might allow for the narration of a real and imagined trans feminist “us” that hangs together, without obscuring the painful, dangerous—and more widely shared than most of “us” would care to admit—trans antagonism and transmisogyny embedded in past and present liberal, radical, and other feminist projects. There, I was (and am) interested in the idea—first opened for me by Ann Cvetkovich’s *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), Eve Sedgwick’s (2003) and José Muñoz’s (2006) queer/brown/depressed reworkings of Melanie Klein’s *depressive position*, and Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer’s compiled *cripistemologies* (2014)—that thinking reflexively as an avowed depressive might enable ways of approaching histories and presents of conflict without moving immediately toward their resolution. And further, that doing so might allow for a more adequate description of what is going on.

Asked to return to this essay years later—first in the process of revising it for the book and then for this anthology—I can’t help but be struck by the persistence of its timeliness in some respects. “Trans, Feminism” glimpsed in 2014/2015, that period of optimism about *trans*’s tip into legibility, the resurgent mainstreaming of trans exclusion under the guise of feminist concern. Now, after the advent of popular and university-authorized “gender-critical feminism,” Abigail Shrier’s trip to Washington to testify against the Equality Act, and so on, things I had to actively argue in that essay seem utterly obvious. As a consequence, I’ve come to think of that essay as having been written in depressive time, a retrospective understanding glossed only very briefly in the revised manuscript as a sense “that if the conflicted history of trans/feminism tells us anything, it is that times recur.” In the present chapter, I attempt to unfold this retrospective insight with a bit more care by inching toward an account of “depressive time” as a particular kind of crip time, one that undergirds my reading like a depressed transsexual.

In doing so, I hope to sit in conversation with the vast and growing writing on various minoritized, and especially crip, temporalities, entangled literatures that I cannot do justice to in this short chapter. Still, I will say that crip time, first a disability culture commonplace, has been widely taken up by critical disability studies scholars as a means of describing the temporal dimensions of ableist oppression and the construction of disability under capitalism, as

well as a set of potentially resistant, creative, nonnormative ways of inhabiting socially patterned time that are often necessitated by embodyminded disability and nurtured by crip community (Kafer 2013; Samuels and Freeman 2021). In these renderings, crip time throws into relief the ways that dominant orderings of time actively *produce* disability as the name for the forms of embodymindedness that cannot or will not “operate according to capitalist logic and labor time” and, potentially, offers and prefigures modes of living otherwise (Fink 2019, 9). Ellen Samuels (2017) has complicated this hopeful account of life in crip time, however, by offering a partial inventory of its “less appealing aspects . . . [ones] that are harder to see as liberatory, more challenging to find a way to celebrate,” precisely because they are shot through with bad feelings, by which I mean feelings that are (1) phenomenologically painful, (2) not easily harnessed for collective politics and world-making, or (3) regarded as potentially pathological in a diagnostic setting. And yet the bad feelings she describes as crip time’s “less appealing aspects” cannot only be understood as the *consequence* of inhabiting crip time, of falling out of “the sheltered space of normative time” (Samuels 2017). Rather, crip time might and has also been theorized as the forms of phenomenological or lived time that inhere in forms of bad feeling, mental disability, madness, or neurodivergence that are often composed of or manifested as non-normative temporalities.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Alison Kafer’s oft-cited account of crip time in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* raises questions about this second sense of crip time, even as its most circulated passages focus elsewhere: “What would constitute a temporality of mania, or depression, or anxiety? If we think of queer time as involving archives of rage and shame, then why not also panic attacks or fatigue? How does depression slow down time, making moments drag for days, or how do panic attacks cause linear time to unravel, making time seem simultaneously to speed up and slam shut, leaving one behind?” (Kafer 2013, 37). The remainder of this brief chapter thinks alongside one of Kafer’s questions, “How does depression slow down time . . . ?” as well as meditates on what depressive time might lend to the doing of critical trans cultural studies. I do so by first accounting for the place of depression within contemporary trans discourse and then by elaborating on what I mean by depressive time as a particular (lack of) “future orientation” (Cavaletti and Heimann 2020, 272).

## Depressed Transsexuals

Depression has long been endemic to the representation of trans life in US contexts, including persistent studies emerging from the psy disciplines that attempt to quantify the correlation between trans identity, depression, and other forms of mental disability. Whether explicitly or implicitly, these studies make claims about the larger projects of trans medicine and social support; rhetorically, the

value of both has been attached to the question of transition's efficacy as an antidepressant, whether or not it actually works to alleviate depression (and other bad feelings) among trans people.<sup>2</sup> This has meant that trans-antagonistic commentators have been inclined to latch onto singular studies that evidence enduring trans depression and suicidality as a way of attempting to undermine the consensus view that transition is "an effective treatment" (Dhejne et al. 2011; Williams 2015).

Likewise, *trans* has been linked to depressive forms of feeling and thought through the saturation of trans characters and storylines with bad feeling. "Transgender identity," as Cael Keegan has argued, "has been sutured to specific forms of negative affect. . . . The fictional transgender figure has traditionally been marked as vulnerable to or productive of extreme emotional states, portrayed either as the emotive center of a narrative (*The Crying Game*), as disturbed, erratic, or unstable (*Silence of the Lambs*, *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives*), or psychotically violent (*Dressed to Kill*, *Sleepaway Camp*)" (2013). While we have now available to us a set of tacitly trans-affirmative representations—ones that depict trans narratives as "journeys from negative to redemptive affect, from psychosis to mental health, from self-hatred to a celebration of liberal individuality" (Keegan 2013)—these are nonetheless powered by the enduring sense that trans people are a uniquely depressed and suicidal population who might be cured via recourse to the "universalized trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization" (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013, 67). While Keegan has described this narrative structure in the context of millennial cinema and television, one likewise encounters it in legal briefs, academic and journalistic articles, and celebrity profiles alike. These documents tend to rely on a familiar set of statistics—40 percent of trans adults have attempted suicide in our lifetime (James et al. 2016, 5), trans students are nearly twice as likely to be depressed and nearly three times as likely to self-harm compared with their cis peers (Bauer-Wolf 2019), and so on—statistics whose endless repetition renders trans depression and its cure common sense.

Against this use of the common sense of trans depression to construct the trans subject as in need of cure, there has lately been an interest in understanding depression as instead indexing the deleterious effects of trans antagonism. In these accounts, depression is not inherent to trans life, not a symptom of wrong embodiment that can only be cured via somatic intervention. Instead, depression is positioned as one outcome of life under trans antagonism—it is a social and political rather than individualizable problem. This political account of bad trans feeling has, of course, long been present in critical trans studies and politics. Back in 1994, for example, Susan Stryker offered a reading of the suicide of a young trans woman as being the outcome of trans misogyny within a queer community, not some inherent unbearable trans feeling. Recounting the "despair" engendered in the young woman as she entered the data collected

from a community survey on whether the Lesbian Resource Center where she volunteered should stop offering services to trans women, Stryker concludes with the pointed rhetorical question, “Did [she] commit suicide, or did the queer community of Seattle kill her?” (1994, 239–240). However, while sociopolitical accounts of trans depression are certainly not new, they have only recently come to structure more official discourse. As a part of this shift, recent studies of small cohorts of usually well-off youths increasingly report that trans and other gender-nonconforming kids who are supported in living out their genders socially are at no higher risk of depression than their cisgender peers. One such report insists that “the current findings do not negate the experiences of the many transgender people who face high rates of mental health challenges, but do provide further evidence that being transgender is not synonymous with these challenges” (Gibson, Glazier, and Olson 2021).

In short, decoupling trans identity from depression is part of a larger, multi-sited, and sometimes contradictory attempt to produce the trans subject as able-minded. “Yet,” as Jake Pyne reminds, “the fact that a trans person can now be considered able-minded must also be understood as a means of distancing ourselves from disabled and mentally suspect others” (2021, 346–347). Further, as I have argued elsewhere, the “methodological distancing” of transness from disability in general and mental disability in particular is long-standing and has its roots not in official “expert” discourse but rather in trans community, activist, and intellectual life (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 2; Awkward-Rich 2020). And as I have also argued, disability studies teaches me that we should, at minimum, be suspicious of this move insofar as it ideologically reinforces (while appearing to contest) the very ableism and sanism that has long undergirded the withholding of care, first-person authority, and bodily autonomy from trans, disabled, racialized, and other minoritized people. While distancing *trans* from *mad* has certainly been important for the project of authorizing trans knowledge projects, this distancing too often proceeds not by contesting medicolegal regulation per se but rather by merely contesting that the trans subject is its proper object. Under these conditions, “trans and [other] psychiatrized people saying that they are not disabled because there is nothing wrong with them . . . work[s] to reinforce the idea that there is something wrong with those disabled people they are trying to distance themselves from” (Withers 2012, 112).

But, and perhaps more to the point, the project of loosening the association between *trans* and *mad* paints depression, madness, mental illness, and neurodivergence as somehow separable from trans knowledge and ways of knowing. More forcefully, the common sense of trans depression contains a particular assumption that undergirds all of its uses—antagonistic and affirmative alike—which is that *depression* can only be understood as counter to life and knowledge: it is what indexes a wrong body, a wrong society, or a wrong kind of interpretation. But reading like a depressed transsexual means instead taking an interest in

how depression has and might shape trans ways of knowing. Indeed, given their persistently tight coupling, refusing to think of trans and depressed epistemologies as interrelated seems to me, frankly, an absurd proposition. And so, both because I am invested in a trans studies that is *not* invested in a future in which *trans* is understood as able-minded at the expense of trans-crip coalitions, and because it simply seems true to me that trans cultural and intellectual production has long been saturated by depressive forms of feeling and thought—whether this is a side effect of life under unjust conditions or not—it seems worth it to me to linger for a while in the impasse even though it does not feel good.

### Depressive Time

As Ann Cvetkovich remarks, “With its spatial connotations of being at a ‘dead end’ or ‘no exit,’ impasse captures the notion of depression as a state of being ‘stuck,’ of not being able to figure out what to do or why to do it” (2012, 20). Further, as Berlant’s elaborations of *impasse* remind, *being stuck* is not the same as *nothing is happening*. Indeed, stuckness might be characterized by a flurry of activity: “dogpaddling,” turning things over, “flailing” around for a new genre that might (or might not) take hold (Berlant 2018, 157). Trans philosopher Hil Malatino has theorized such non-future-bound activity—in his formulation, the nonteleological activity of transition—as characterizing life “in interregnum, in the crucial and transformative moments between past and future, between the regime of what was and the promise of what might be” (Malatino 2019, 644), whereas in his 2021 novel *Future Feeling*, Joss Lake terms this psychic time/space the Shadowlands, a trip through which, he posits, is a necessary part of transition, of reorienting oneself in and vis-à-vis the past and future. For both Malatino and Lake, “whatever being trans is about, it’s decidedly characterized by upheaval and emergence into a social world with shifting and shifted parameters” (Malatino 2020, 3), an emergence that requires withdrawing one’s attachments to scripted, anticipated, and “promissory futures” (Malatino 2019, 644).

If it is not yet apparent, depressive time in my formulation has to do with the future. Specifically, it is a name for time lived in the absence of a socially patterned horizon of expectation, an absence that accounts for the commonplace understanding that time in depression is experienced as slowed down, “making moments drag for days” or, in the case of the moment of 2014, for years on end (Kafer 2013, 37). Although researchers in the psy disciplines seem to agree that people in the midst of depression reliably report experiencing time as slow or even stopped, why this might be, the mechanism that underlies the felt experience, is a relatively open question: “Despite the large number of studies,” Daniel Oberfeld and colleagues report in their 2014 overview, “a firm conclusion to the effect that depression does indeed alter time perception cannot be drawn” (1). That is, studies that set out to measure depressed participants’ ability to estimate

or produce particular time intervals—by, for example, estimating the time that passes between two sounds or producing a one-minute interval by pressing a button on either end—do not reliably suggest that those in depressions are actually inclined to misperceive short, actively engaged durations. In contrast to these studies, Ann Marie Roepke and Martin E. P. Seligman offer a different language for what I am, through Berlant, trying to describe when they propose that depression involves a loss of (or reduction in) ability to relate to the future as an open horizon and to project oneself into it; for them, depression is “prospec-tion go[ne] awry” (2016, 24). This hypothesis, in turn, resonates with decades of phenomenologically inflected work on depressive time (Wyllie 2005; Fuchs 2013; Minkowski 1970), which has understood time as “*lived*, i.e. arising from our precognitive orientation towards the future and existentially shaping our subjective experience” (Cavaletti and Heimann 2020, 272). Time slows in depression, then, not because of a misperception but because of a lack of future orientation, a lack that might cause the present-past to stretch out indefinitely even as things continue to happen, other people move on. Although they approach depression through the framework of pathology, I find these phenomenologies of depressive time useful as descriptions; this is my experience of depression anyway, that time moves along without me in it.

In some ways, depressive time stands in direct opposition to many dominant and academic constructions of trans time, in which transness has to do with movement into open futures through “unexpected becomings” (Stryker and Currah 2014, 9), with “how *what could happen* haunts the present” (Keegan 2018, 3), with “futurity itself” (Halberstam 2005, 18). Of course, however, the conflation of transness with futurity enables trans oppression, undergirding the structure of recurrent moral panics that must regard trans women and children as perpetually new (and trans men as perpetually nonexistent in the present) for their emotional force. Further, as has been repeatedly argued, not all forms of trans life (not even all forms within the narrow Euro-American parameters) are regarded as future-bound. Clinical investigations into autistic trans populations, for example, are presently structured by a “prying apart of autistic and trans life” in order to foster the “hope that the trans future might leave autism behind” (Pyne 2021, 351). Or, as the editors of the “Trans Temporalities” special issue of *Somatechnics* remind, the overdetermined link between *Black trans woman* and shortened life-span indicates that “only ‘some versions of transness’ are associated with futurity while for others, having a future at all is not a given” (Fisher, Phillips, and Katri 2017, 3–4). Or, as Jules Gill-Peterson demonstrates in *Histories of the Transgender Child*, the 1930s understanding of “black children’s sexed plasticity” as “atavistic” eventually led to the “withholding of the narrow parameters of . . . transsexuality from black children” in the 1960s (2018, 80, 160). Something peculiar happens, then, at the intersection of *trans* and social categories constructed as having to do with slowness, delay, backwardness, atavism, and so

on—namely, those who inhabit such crisscrossing temporalities are always at risk of being declared *not really trans*. So, as Pyne points out, “trans communities” are often primed, by the experience of delays in care and social or legal recognition, “to welcome affirmation in whatever suspect form it arrives and, further, to disavow our relation to those who are deemed ‘slow’ or ‘delayed’” (2021, 347). But also, and perhaps more fundamentally, the commonplace understanding of *trans* as—for better and for worse—future-bound has worked to narrow who can appear as subjects of trans pasts, presents, and futures. The story about *trans* as futurity itself is a story with racial, disabling effects.

Here is what I have been trying to say: since 2014/2015 we have moved increasingly into a future in which *trans* can be registered as *able-minded* and reading like a depressed transsexual is my way of trying to not orient myself toward the lure of that future. But reading as an avowed depressive is not a new method, nor is it one that I recommend universalizing; depressive epistemologies know many things very poorly, perhaps especially how to do the urgent political work of imagining and enacting some kind of futures we might actually desire. To this end, Kafer’s discussion of crip time is embedded within a larger concern and “desire for crip futurity” (2013, 27). Tarrying with the queer temporalities on offer in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, Kafer echoes and extends Muñoz, Heather Love, Jasbir Puar, and others by insisting that a fuck-the-future stance is “untenable” for disabled, racialized, trans, and otherwise minoritized people because of the way that the future is already constructed without and against us: “The task, then, is not so much to refuse the future as to imagine disability and disability futures otherwise, as part of other, alternate temporalities that do not cast disabled people out of time, as the sign of the future of no future” (34). By suggesting that no future might be a crip time after all, I mean simply that a crucial part of the work of imagining other futures, as Kafer implores us to do, is simultaneously learning not to want the ones that are ready-to-hand and promise feel-good endings. And indeed, one thing that depressives know very well, for better and for worse, is how to not want the future on offer. This produces and reinforces often painful desynchronization, but it also is one more way of refusing to (or being, frankly, unable to) understand the statistically white, nondisabled, neurotypical, well-supported trans child—the ones for whom it is possible in the first place to occupy “the sheltered space of normative time” (Samuels 2017)—as *the* subject of trans history and futurity.

#### NOTES

- 1 In an essay I do not engage here but am clearly thinking alongside, Clementine Morrigan (2017) theorizes “trauma time” as one such form of crip/mad time.
- 2 Although its rhetoric and venue drew ire from many corners of the trans internet, Andrea Long Chu is in my view correct to be suspicious of the way that trans healthcare is justified, in liberal discourse, not because bodily-autonomy is good in itself but, specifically, because transition might deliver on the promise of happiness (Chu 2018).

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