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Conference Report: *Harvard University Graduate Music Forum Conference: "TRANS∗Media"*

by Stephen Tian-You Ai and Christina Misaki Nikitin

Introduction

From February 28th to March 1st, 2025, the Harvard University Department of Music's Graduate Music Forum held its annual graduate conference with the theme, "TRANS∗Media." As the organizers of the 2025 conference, we sought to build on momentum generated by recent panels addressing trans issues at major U.S./Canadian music studies conferences and provide a dedicated setting for such conversations.[1] We welcomed sixty attendees and hosted sixteen papers and performances by graduate students and early professionals, representing twelve institutions, five countries, and nine disciplines. The conference featured a keynote address by McKenzie Wark (The New School); a video screening by Nguyễn Tân Hoàng (University of California, San Diego); a roundtable discussion featuring Kaleb Goldschmitt (Wellesley College), Julián X. Latshang (Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences), and Stephan Pennington (Tufts University); and a concert by percussion-piano quartet Yarn/Wire featuring compositions by the Harvard Group for New Music. The conference was supported financially by the Harvard University Department of Music and the Open Gate Foundation.[2] The full program may be found here.[3]

The conference theme, "TRANS∗Media," sought to explore the meanings bound in the prefix "trans-"—conveying "across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another" (*OED*, n.d.)—as it pertains to sounding media, with a marked emphasis on transsexual and transgender musicalities, experiences, and lives. The title itself alluded to several texts that demarcated the central line of inquiry. First, we took inspiration from Susan Stryker's movement-oriented formulation of "transgender" in *Transgender History* as "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth" (2008, 1). The asterisk, which first emerged in online gender-community spaces (see Tompkins 2014), was taken from Jack Halberstam's *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. As Halberstam explains, "the asterisk holds off the certainty of [gender] diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of know-

[1] Our sincere thanks go to the junior scholars who organized groundbreaking conference panels committed to trans subjectivities and musicalities in the past several years, bringing forth innovative scholarship, critical dialogues, and intellectual networks that provided the blueprint for our conference. We were particularly inspired by the following: "Listening for Queer and Trans Lives" at the 2022 American Musicological Society–Society for Ethnomusicology–Society for Music Theory (AMS-SEM-SMT) Joint Annual Meeting in New Orleans, LA; "Transauralities: Thinking Trans in Music/Sound Studies" at the 2023 AMS–SMT Joint Annual Meeting in Denver, CO; "Partying on the Periphery: Global Queer/Trans Nightlives" at the virtual 2024 SEM Annual Meeting; "Listening Trans and Trans Listening: Approaches to Music Analysis" at the 2024 SMT Annual Meeting in Jacksonville, FL; and "Voicing Trans/Queer Musical Dialogues" at 2024 Feminist Theory and Music 17 (2024) in Ann Arbor, MI, among many others.

[2] We would like to thank the editors of *Intégral*—Kaylee Bernard, Maeve Gillen, and Ryan Jones—for their interest in having us publish a report on this conference. We are especially grateful to Maeve, who reached out as an attendee that advocated for the importance of documenting this event for the benefit of the broader academic community, and who provided invaluable feedback and guidance throughout the editorial process.
[3] Our many thanks to Sam Huber for his exceptional design work on this conference program book.

ing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations" (2018, 4). Notably, this asterisk also appears in Dana Baitz's "Toward a Trans* Method in Musicology," which differentiates a trans* musicological approach from a queer one by its interest in "investing in the body" (2018, 371) as a primary locus of knowledge production. Lastly, the title makes reference to "transmedia storytelling" as coined by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, which describes a technique that unfolds a story "across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (2006, 95–6). By employing the lithographical flourish of the centered asterisk (∗) over the raised one (*), we bypass a visual shorthand that risks flattening "trans" into a categorical umbrella and orient our critical inquiry on the movements afforded by the asterisk's open-ended variation.

With these competing perspectives on trans∗ in mind, the conference sought to engage with two principal questions with a particular focus on transgender and transsexual experiences and musicalities: How does sound move across, between, and beyond media? And how does sound move media?

This capacious framing of trans∗—from movement to diagnosis to attitude to media system—foregrounded a critical tension in trans studies between trans-as-identity and trans-as-method. On one hand, trans-as-identity is concerned with trans life, speaking to the desires, feelings, legacies, and knowledges of trans individuals and communities. On the other hand, trans-as-method takes full embrace of the prefix's ability to animate boundary crossing (e.g., transnational, transdisciplinary, transspecies) to invent alternative ways of knowing. The former has been criticized for a return to essentialism and an overreliance on the human figure (Halberstam 2022), while the latter has been charged with extracting the prefixal "trans-" at the expense of transgender and transsexual people (Chu and Drager 2019; Amin 2023). Through this conference, we aimed to bring this important conversation to the field of music studies by selecting a wide range of papers on this spectrum. As the organizers, we felt that music and sound—always political, slippery in its representation, and often abstract—had and will continue to have much to say in this ongoing debate.

1. Trans∗ Bodies and Voices

Given trans studies' foundational understanding that bodies and technologies are always already enmeshed (see Sullivan & Murray 2016; Gill-Peterson 2014), it was unsurprising that the majority of conference papers focused on unpacking the technological capacity, mediation, and intervention of trans bodies and voices. Notably, such technologies circumscribe the material conditions of trans life, employed by trans subjects in variable practices of disclosure which seek social recognition through a performance of gender (in)authenticity.

Keaton Ireland (New York University) and Noah Witke Mele (New York University) dealt explicitly with medical transition in their analysis of Arca's *Mutant;Destrudo* (2023), which features the Venezuelan experimental artist's transfeminine body adorned with a prosthetic transmasculine body suit. For Ireland and Mele, Arca's obfuscation of dominant medical and social narratives of transition—is Arca here male-to-female or female-to-male?—reveals prosthetic technologies as experimental enactions on an always-already synthetic sex/gender system. Turning to the dysphoric and transitioning trans voice, Dani Heffernan (University of California, Los Angeles) examined voice feminization exercises performed by multiple transfeminine speakers in Sarah Hennies's multimedia work *Contralto* (2017), demonstrating how the piece transforms vocal dysphoria from an individual concern into a collective affective experience. In a moment of conferencing serendipity, multimedia artist and producer ILĀ (ilā kamalagharan, Moth Quantum), supported by Coda Nicolaeff (TRANS VOICES), instantiated such a collective affective experience of vocal euphoria and dysphoria in a live choral performance of *RECURSE* (2025). This was achieved by employing machine-learning model Neutone, which blended ILĀ's voice with those of the UK-based gender-diverse choir, TRANS VOICES.

Moving beyond the sounded, embodied voice to issues of authorial voice, several papers considered how trans∗ is strategically envoiced within normative structures. Vik J. Squires (Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne) presented an interpretative phenomenological analysis of Australia's predominantly cismale and largely transphobic metal scene. Squires highlighted how the scene's embrace of the "social outcast" both facilitated gender experimentation and eventual coming out of two transwomen performers. Identifying a similar negotiation in queer and trans electronic music scenes, Lily Shababi (University of California, Los Angeles) shed light on the ways in which trans hyperpop artists employ experimental production technologies to defy the music industry's attempts to codify and capture the genre. Finally, Euge Helyantus Stumm (University of Miami) examined the development of Pajubá—a cryptolect combining Yoruba, French, Italian, and English developed by *travesti* sex workers in Brazil—and its expressive capacity as a weapon for survival and a musical language in Brazilian Funk. For Stumm, Pajubá's power lies in its flexibility and

continuous evolution; upon capture by the mainstream, it evolves further, maintaining its ability to function as linguistic resistance.

2. Trans∗ Archive and Memory

Another major theme that arose was the question of how trans histories are written, preserved, and reclaimed. In a current political climate that insists on trans disappearance, a very few number of visible archives that elegize trans subjects' pasts have been used to construct narratives—for better or for worse—of tragic victimhood, romantic resistance, and so on. How does one remember in such destitute conditions? What other material, affective, and sonic media can hold such memories?

Drawing from a kaleidoscopic collection of various media in sonic collage, Luz Chávez (Independent) presented a trans critique of the home through creative accumulation, exploring the ways in which trans people navigate and struggle against cisheteropatriarchal norms to refashion the home as a space of radical care. Similarly, Morgan Bates (University of California, Los Angeles) examined how Angélica Negrón's ethereal cinematic opera *The Island We Made* (2021) mobilizes the figure of the drag mother (played by Sasha Velour) to destabilize normative time and space by evoking nostalgia through uncanny and ethereal audiovisual representations of home. Dan Levy (McGill University) conducted close readings of scenes from the coming-of-age film *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024), attending to the film's careful curation and compilation of "sad songs" in forming a t4t ("trans-for-trans") care that reaches out of the screen and into the contested homes of trans audiences. Broaching the unwanted intrusion of HIV/AIDS remembrance into the patriarchal home by Brendan Maclean's infamous and raunchy *House of Air* (2017), Jo Michael Rezes (Tufts University) engaged with virality, both digital and biological, to place humor and camp at the heart of queer remembrance and survival.

While such visible representations of trans memory in film and opera houses are certainly to be celebrated, Alejandrina M. Medina (University of California, San Diego) reminded us that such works, which represent the completion of an artistic process, are easily co-opted by logics of productivity and extraction. Analyzing staged performances of getting ready by artist Mark Aguhar, Medina argued for an attention to the quotidian labor that anticipates and prepares transfeminine life, drawing out the crucial role of "feminine indolence" in staving off inevitable ends. Kelsey "Chloë" Sucena (Alfred University) also issued a word of caution on the subject of documenting trans lives, meditating on Susan Sontag's (1977) condemnation of photography as a tool of masculine, colonial domination. Declaring that "my camera is a pussy," Sucena re-embraces the analog camera, which escapes digital regimes of surveillance, and in doing so, refigures photography as a medium of connection, care, and historical preservation for her trans community.[4]

3. Trans∗ Relationality

The remaining papers took a broader approach to trans∗ and considered how a wider purview can shape our attitudes and relationships toward surrounding media ecologies and natural environments. Sergio De Iudicibus (Yale University) analyzed the opening scene of the Netflix series *You* (2018) by way of an imaginative re-reading of the Narcissus myth, emphasizing the power of the disembodied voice to inhabit different bodies—especially of gender and age—and beckon the spectator to "drown in" the screen. By theorizing a transvocal system that renders the boundary between reality and screen porous, De Iudicibus drew out the larger stakes of such immersion, particularly in relation to lip-synced TikTok audios and AI-generated voices that have come to characterize our media soundscape. Mayank Dutt Kaushik (Jawaharlal Nehru University) went beyond screen media to theorize the transsensorial system of extended reality (XR), mixed reality (MR), augmented reality (AR), and AI-driven platforms. For Kaushik, because of XR/MR/AR/AI's ability to create narrative agency through sensorial immersion, this transsensorial system offers innovative ways to rethink identity and freedom for the trans subject. Steve 4. Tu (University of Toronto) presented a multispecies ethnography developing a practice of transspecies and transnational listening and pedagogy by blending Salomé Voegelin's (2010) concept of listening as transformative engagement with Daoist notions of harmony and flow. This practice attunes to other-than-human stories, allowing Tu to delaminate accumulated histories of colonial domination from Indigenous histories on his own campus's green spaces. Finally, Fabricio Cavero Farfan (University of California, Irvine) performed a fragment of his transmedial opera *The Primeval Poet*, which blends inherited Precolumbian Andean clay technology with modern audio equipment to restore and eulogize an Indigenous American academe that learned and listened alongside sacred plants in ritual, study, and everyday life.

4. Video Screening: "An Accented Pornography"

The first day concluded with a screening of experimental videos by Nguyễn Tân Hoàng (University of California,

[4] See Sucena (2025) for a published version of this presentation.

San Diego) titled "An Accented Pornography,"[5] showcasing works from various stages of their career as video artist and scholar, including *K.I.P.* (2002), *look_im_azn* (2011), *Sad Porn Circa 1994* (2025), *Oriental Hardon* (2025), and *The Lesbian Hand* (in-progress). Through this curated selection of works, Nguyễn explored effeminized portrayals of Asian and Asian-American men in gay pornography to reformulate Asian male "bottomhood" as an oppositional worldview and tactic with the power to destabilize sexual, gender, and racial norms.

Nguyễn proposed "accented pornography" as a mode of listening that hears the soft, hesitant, and at times unintelligible vocalizations of Asian "bottom" actors not merely as stereotypical markers, but as affective expressions that legitimize an alternative sexual subject-position within Orientalist gay fantasies.[6] They also traced the historical specificity of these sexualized and racialized subjectivities, examining the shifting formulations of Asian male feminization against the sociopolitical backdrops of the Vietnam War, the gay liberation movement, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The critical role of the archive in documenting queer and trans histories was made tactile in *Oriental Hardon* (2025), which featured mail-order nude snapshots of anonymous Asian men in hotel rooms from the 1980s and 1990s, sourced from the University of South Florida's "The Asian Male Nude Collection." Transposing Tina M. Campt's (2017) theoretical framework of "listening to images" into practice, Nguyễn synced the visual progression of the photos to a cacophonous soundscape of analog and digital technology (e.g., fax machines, dial-up modems), attuning to the material frictions of the archive as a site of preservation and de-generation.

Following the screening, a talkback was moderated by Graduate Music Forum member Eloy Ramirez (Harvard University), who guided a dynamic conversation on the superimposition of colonial violence and phallic aggression within many of Hoàng's archival pieces, in addition to expanding upon the potential of pornography as a medium for reclaiming "bottomhood" as a site of "active receptivity" (Nguyễn 2014). The event closed with a Q&A session, during which Nguyễn provided practical advice for junior scholars navigating institutional backlash amidst rising anti-DEI policies, ultimately demonstrating how transmedia frameworks can unsettle the white, cisheteronormative gaze both in the archive and within the academy.

[5] Please note that the title of the screening was changed from the one listed in the official program.

[6] See Nguyễn (2014), which builds upon Hamid Naficy's (2001) theory of "accented cinema" to examine portrayals of "fresh off the boat" Asian actors in gay pornography.

5. Keynote: "Rave | Practice"

McKenzie Wark (The New School), writer and critical theorist with particular interests in media theory, trans studies, Marxist criticism, and the Anthropocene, delivered the keynote address, "Rave | Practice."[7] Known for her deeply personal, self-reflexive, and conceptually rigorous writing style which she terms "critical (auto) theory," Wark presented a rich autoethnographic account of New York's underground rave scenes.[8] Expanding upon her recent monograph *Raving* (2023b), she situated her work between autofiction and autotheory to reveal writing, theorizing, and raving as mutually constitutive practices.

Guiding us through her lived experiences as a raver, Wark provided thick sensorial descriptions of a typical Brooklyn rave, detailing the relational dynamics between ravers, the collective labor of DJs and venue staff, the spatial mapping of the dance floor, and the heightened psychic sensation of drug use. She emphasized the distinct stakes of participating in nightlife for queer and trans subjects, pointing to the vital presence of *dolls*—an affirmative vernacular for the trans women whose affective, sexual, and material labor actively sustain these underground spaces.

Wark's reflexivity in her positionality as a trans woman, scholar, and long-time raver allowed for a conceptualization of raving through a distinctly transsexual experience of time and space, a framework made especially salient in the topic of dissociation. She defined "ravespace" as a situational continuum occurring at the nexus of music, dance, and ketamine, demarcating a site of vacillation between psychic dissociation and euphoric enfleshment. This state of dissociation in a rave, wherein mind and body are free of one another, offered new understandings of the contentious discourse concerning (dis)embodiment within trans studies. Through her autotheoretical mapping of the trans body drifting across "sideways time," Wark illustrated a non-linear, non-vertical traversal of space, articulating a trans temporality that extends beyond and collapses into the boundless horizon of the dance floor. By centering trans subjectivities in this sono-somatic phenomenon, Wark shed new light upon the technological capacities of sound and music in reconfiguring time, space, and the body.

6. Roundtable: Trans-As-Identity Vs Trans-As-Method

The roundtable convened ethnomusicologist and popular music scholar Kaleb Goldschmitt, activist and univer-

[7] Please note that the title of the keynote address was changed from the one listed in the official program.

[8] For further discussion of Wark's tactical uses of autofiction and autotheory in her written works, see Wark (2023a).

sity dean Julián X. Latshang, critical musicologist Stephan Pennington, and keynote respondent Wark to discuss the conference's central stakes in the tenuous friction between trans-as-identity and trans-as-method. These senior scholars addressed these theoretical tensions not only through disciplinary expertise, but perhaps more significantly, through their lived experiences shaped by a multitude of roles they simultaneously occupy within and beyond the academy.

Goldschmitt began their remarks by inhabiting the current difficult political moment, speaking candidly about the challenges of teaching at a historically all-women's college. Contemplating the pressing question of "what to do" at this juncture, they turned to the activist music label Red Hot Organization's recent compilation album *TRAИSA* (2024) for a possible answer. The album, which pays homage to Brazilian gender-bending musician Caetano Veloso, features contributions of trans/non-binary, queer, and allied musicians from various genres and generations, gesturing toward the possibility for a trans musical coalition across nations, political allegiances, and media.

Building on the theme of coalition, Latshang reflected on their time as Interim President of the local activist organization Trans Resistance MA. Recounting their experiences securing funding, curating, and coordinating a music festival for the organization's annual march, they attested to the power of music to cultivate trans joy, which is crucial for sustaining community and mobilizing action. Speaking also from their role as dean of student affairs, Latshang revealed the dual burden faced by professionals of marginalized identities in navigating everyday encounters with racial and transphobic hostilities on campus while also bearing the emotional labor of supporting students through those same violent structures.

In his contribution to the roundtable, Pennington revisited the "inconvenient" but canonical voices of trans history, such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, to deliver a critique of the historiographical urge to tidy up, truncate, and distort the biographies of black trans revue girls, hookers, and drag queens to mold them into palatable trans heroes. The repudiation of the bygone figure of the transsexual—made "embarrassing" in the uncritical embrace of Sandy Stone's "posttranssexual" (2006)—stood out as particularly salient and offered prescient insight into contemporary online gender politics. For Pennington, the multiplication of gender identification categories on platforms such as Tumblr marks a shift toward a discourse where "trans" itself becomes a transmedial story to be splintered, distributed, and consumed.

Following these presentations, Wark pulled together common themes pertaining to generational shifts in the politics of representation and the stakes of increased queer and trans visibility. In a tender moment, Wark reflected on her own vantage point as someone who transitioned relatively late in life and reminded us of the painful reality that many who transition early do not make it to her age. The panelists then shared personal experiences of navigating a world ridden with cisheteronormative standards, broaching topics such as issues of safety, the complexities of "passing," the shifting landscape of trans studies, and the ongoing precarities of writing on and through trans∗. For an audience composed mostly of graduate students, young professionals, and early-career artists, this intergenerational exchange provided invaluable guidance and encouragement in an admittedly destitute moment.

Conclusion

At the heart of our conference was a deep concern for the works, practices, experiences, and lives of transgender and transsexual individuals and communities. Since the dissemination of our call for papers in November 2024, trans people in the United States and globally have faced increasingly mounting attacks on their healthcare access, legal recognition, and existence. Under these oppressive conditions, our call to critically consider TRANS∗Media—namely, to indulge in the debates of trans-as-identity and trans-as-method *vis-à-vis* trans experience—may have seemed blissfully ivory-towered. However, we believe that it was precisely because of this precarious moment in time that we not only exchange scholarly insights and engage in critical dialogue, but more importantly, gather as friends and colleagues to collectively practice an ethics of care.

The conference's most profound achievement lies beyond our printed program. It crystallized, instead, in the fleeting moments, the unscripted exchanges, and the serendipitous encounters that transgressed the confines of an official schedule. It materialized in the sheer gravity of our collective presence, an assembly of queer and trans scholars flooding seminar rooms, spilling out into the hallways, and taking up space in the department shared lounge. It resonated in the affective surplus of the in-between, in the contagious laughter over shared meals and the animated debates carried over into coffee breaks. It thrived into the late hours of the night, culminating in a karaoke session fueled by cheap cocktails and belting "Danza Kuduro" until our voices gave out. TRANS∗Media marked a convergence of a radical kinship years in the making, emerging in the peripheries of larger conferences, through informal mentorships, across quiet solidarities. Even as queer/trans utopia continues to be out of reach, the conference offered a rare glimpse of its warm glow on the horizon, underscoring the need for such ad hoc moments of communal healing.

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