

Provincializing Trans* Modernity

Asterisked Histories and Multiple Horizons

in Der Steinachfilm

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Abstract This article aims to disrupt notions of modernity deeply inscribed in the origin narrative of trans studies by thinking through the relationship between transgender, the transatlantic, and Europe. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's and Christina Sharpe's Black feminist theorizing of the asterisk and the multiple meanings embedded in *trans**, the article takes up the archives of European sexology to explore their entangled histories as well as their limitations. Through a critical reading of *Der Steinachfilm* that is attentive to its transgressive imaginary as well as its silenced colonial and racial subtext, the author aims to contribute to the necessary task of provincializing some of trans studies' dominant epistemologies.

Keywords archives, asterisked histories, modernity, *trans** horizons, Eugen Steinach

Transgender and Transatlantic Tides in Europe

On a twenty-by-six-foot wall numerous round badges with photographs and names are displayed. They depict doctors and sexologists such as, for example, Harry Benjamin or Magnus Hirschfeld and their respective institutions and publications, as well as famous and lesser-known *trans** people such as Christine Jorgenson and Lili Elbe. Between them, countless red and black threads span a dense web that crosses the spatial and temporal divisions indicated through vertical columns. The spatio-temporal columns represent Vienna, Berlin, New York, and San Francisco as well as Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Casablanca, which are placed more marginally, on the side of the wall. *The Network Wall* (fig. 1) is part of the exhibition *TransTrans: Transatlantic Transgender Histories* at the Schwules Museum in Berlin, which aims to explore *trans** history from 1880 until the 1960s.¹ This history—which is the core statement not only of the wall but the entire exhibition—is the untold story of a network of different individuals who sent each other letters and pictures, published texts, exchanged ideas in professional

networks and within communities, and traveled across borders to meet and share their stories, thus spanning both time and space.

Drawing on the rich archives of US and European sexology, endocrinology, and medicine as well as private collections, the exhibition aspires to trace the entangled histories of gender and border crossings at the turn of the century. With *trans** used in a double sense, *TransTrans* does not only conflate the twofold trans-signifiers, thus intensifying their proximity, but it also names them explicitly as “transatlantic” and “transgender.” While this (re)naming of the exhibition as “transatlantic” instead of, for example, “transnational” might well be due to a recent tide of popularity of the transatlantic,² the Middle Passage, and the afterlife of slavery within German-speaking academia as well as cultural productions indicating a renewed investment in the valorization and appropriation of Black feminist and radical thought by white academics and white institutions,³ it is striking that in the context of *The Network Wall* and the exhibition at large, the transatlantic becomes solidified as a threshold crossed only through the exchange of ideas and the mobility of individual white bodies. Despite the title, the Atlantic figures as an empty space, void of meaning making, the woolen threads connecting Europe and the Americas unchanged by the transatlantic crossing. Furthermore, on *The Network Wall* as well as in the exhibition at large, Blackness remains absent, once more swallowed by the vast waters of the Atlantic. Representing the Atlantic as free of its violent histories and essentially void of Blackness, *TransTrans* echoes the structure of the classical archive, which, as Syrus Marcus Ware (2017: 171) reminds us, “always begins with whiteness.”

The archives of European sexology and its related fields of medicine and endocrinology that the exhibition draws from continue to play a constitutive role for trans studies today. Building on Michel Foucault’s (2007) conception of critique as practice of desubjugation, Susan Stryker’s (2006) notion of trans studies as “(de)subjugated knowledge” has become a canonical reference in this regard. As such, trans studies represents a critical intervention in a discursive field that objectifies and pathologizes *trans** people and marginalizes their knowledge. Haunting “the entire project of European culture” (15), the study of “transgender phenomena,” and the archives attesting to that knowledge production, are nevertheless central for trans studies’ epistemological project. As its foundational antithesis, they are the basis from which trans studies asserts itself, thus placing Europe firmly at the center of trans studies’ origin narrative. Following Stryker’s assertion of transgender phenomena haunting European culture, which is further echoed by the editors of this issue who state in the call for papers that “at the heart of European modernity lies the inscription of the transsexual body,” this essay attempts to spin the argument around, asking how contemporary epistemologies of transness as well as trans studies are haunted by the project of European



Figure 1. *The Network Wall* at the *TransTrans Exhibition*, Schwules Museum, Berlin 2019–20. © Paul Sleeve/Schwules Museum.

modernity, its paradoxes and violent histories, as well as the accompanying denial thereof. In other words, the article asks what it would mean to provincialize trans* modernity. Following Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) proposal of provincialization as a mode to interrogate and resist the idea of Europe as the center of History, one vital approach would be to expose how hegemonic Euro-American understandings of gender(-nonconformity) have been imposed as universal, supposedly transcending the historical-cultural specificity in which they originated. Paying attention to universalizing Eurocentric knowledge claims regarding categories of gender as well as concepts of nature and culture, pathology, and language, this analytic aims at "provincializing 'Western Code' trans* narratives" (Höhne and Klein 2019; see also Aizura 2018), pointing to the ways in which those narratives become installed as the only intelligible form of embodiment and subjectivity. Further, such an approach foregrounds counter-archives of "trans phenomena" that under Western eyes (Mohanty 1984) might not register as such, thus not only challenging the coloniality of Western concepts but also rejecting the "first in Europe, then elsewhere" structure of global time (Chakrabarty 2000: 7). However, critically engaging the story of the center once more, this essay follows a different route to disrupt notions of modernity deeply inscribed in the master narratives of trans* history and uncover the racial and colonial histories of transgender (Snorton 2017; Gill-Peterson 2018). Taking up the doubling of trans* signifiers that the *TransTrans* exhibition alludes to while providing a critical

reading of another one of the exhibition's artifacts—a popularized movie about Austrian endocrinologist Eugen Steinach, simply called *Der Steinachfilm*—I examine how the archives of European sexology, endocrinology, and medicine are simultaneously constituted by the entangled histories and paradoxes of modernity as well as marked by what I call multiple trans* horizons. Confronting the limits of the archive as a privileged site for trans studies' historical and epistemological projects while remaining attentive to its fugitive allusions of transgender and the transatlantic as well as their respective trans*ings, I hope to contribute to decentering the origin narrative at the center of trans studies and its dominant epistemologies today.

Asterisked Histories and the Limits of the Archive

The archives of European sexology, endocrinology, and medicine as well as the subsequent records of pathologization and medicalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often utilized in the historical quest to locate trans* histories before the advent of trans* vocabulary. Whether these accounts are marked by essentialist claims to trans* ancestors, a genealogical insistence on historical alterity and contingency, or the attentiveness to temporal slippages and affective reaches across time (DeVun and Tortorici 2018), the historical figures of hermaphrodites, sexual inverts, effeminate men, masculine women, and cross-dressers and the knowledge produced about them serve as privileged entry points for trans* historical projects. Critical of the possibility to identify trans* subjects *avant la lettre*, these projects often turn their attention toward the archives themselves to interrogate the epistemological and material conditions under which subjects appear within them. Thus confronted with the regulatory function and the fundamental violence of the archive, “as archive, as archival violence” (Derrida 1996: 7), they aim at developing counter-archival methodologies capable of lifting the silence in the archives and recuperating its submerged histories. Through such counter-archival readings of the violent classificatory logics immanent in the archives of sexology, endocrinology, and medicine, the abjection and the negation inscribed into the historical artifacts become, as Rebekah Edwards (2015: 661) has argued, “the very sign of their (now) trans* signification.” Wrestling those artifacts from the violence of the archives in order to reclaim and resignify, trans* archival readings aim at countering the absence of trans* narratives even without necessarily attempting to restore a fully knowable historical subject in its place. Nevertheless, these counter-archival projects ultimately return to the promise of the archive, even if only through reading its negation. Reaffirming the belief in its restorative capacity, the archive remains privileged as the site of historical inquiry *par excellence* (Arondekar 2009; Lewis 2014).

But what happens to those stories and lives that do not register within these archives? Those that did not leave a trace of their subjectivity, who exist only

in the archive's underbelly, too fugitive to be ever fully grasped and restored even by the queerest of readings?

As Jules Gill-Peterson (2018: 615) has pointed out, the reliance on medical archives within trans studies has “magnified the whiteness of transsexuality” while simultaneously “obscuring the racial conditions” under which trans* phenomena became knowable in the first place. A common feature of the trans* historical projects focusing on the archives of European sexology, endocrinology, and medicine is their omission of the constitutive role of colonialism, not only for the formation of the modern bourgeois order of gender and sexuality in Europe, but also for their transgressions. As postcolonial and decolonial feminists have long shown, gender served as a tool of colonial domination and the construction of the colonial other, as sexual and gender aberration was central to the establishment of the bourgeois order of gender in the colonial metropolises (Lugones 2007; Oye-wùmí 1997; McClintock 1995). Moreover, together, colonial conceptions of race, sexuality, sex, and gender formed the boundary of white conceptions of the Human, thus placing Black(ened) bodies in closer proximity to nonhuman animals and beasts (Jackson 2020). Trans* historical projects that declare the knowledge production of European sexual sciences as the baseline from which modern trans* subjectivities became intelligible must engage with these inextricably interwoven colonial constructions of deviant genders and sexualities. If with modernity an understanding of gender and sexuality emerged that is inseparably interwoven with the colonial matrix and at the same time helps establish it (Lugones 2007), then this understanding is equally the basis for any notions of gender and sexual “abnormality” and the foundation for the epistemologies of the study of trans* phenomena in the colonial metropolises. Thus a genealogy of modern trans*ness beginning with the pathologization, medicalization, and violence directed against those who did not conform to the modern binary gender system cannot be located in Central Europe alone; “rather, it started in the colonies” as b. binaohan (2014: 79) reminds us.

Demonstrating the extent to which the knowledge production of sexual sciences and medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not only permeated by colonial and racial epistemologies (Somerville 2000) but also depended on the material and embodied dimensions of enslavement, the excellent works of C. Riley Snorton (2017) and Gill-Peterson (2017, 2018) provide further critical insights to the racial conditions of modern understandings of sex and gender. Drawing on Hortense Spiller's (1987) notion of the ungendering of Black flesh through the Middle Passage, Snorton's in-depth analysis of the presence of Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and countless other unnamed female slaves in J. Marion Sim's archive illustrates how chattel slavery—the availability and fungibility of captive flesh—was the ontological prerequisite for “an understanding of gender

as mutable and as an amendable form of being“ (Snorton 2017: 57), thus proving the transatlantic slave trade to be a critical component of the genealogy of modern trans*ness. Moreover, as Christina Sharpe (2016: 30) has argued, the Atlantic was always already the Trans* Atlantic, insofar as *trans** denotes the excess of Blackness and the refiguration of Black bodies to captive flesh and fungible commodities, while also calling into question the Western Eurocentric modern gender order and its “inability to hold in/on Black flesh.”

However, apart from “the mysterious *mujerados* and *morphodites* who populate the earliest accounts of European exploitation of the American continents” (Stryker 2006: 14) and who are retrieved in the formative works of, for example, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld, the archives of European sexology and its related fields barely display any visible traces of colonialism or the transatlantic slave trade that accumulate to more than a few fragmented lines, a footnote here, a quick comment there. Even less discernable are the traces of the colonized and enslaved. The few stories that exist are not about them; they appear as nameless, voiceless, and mysterious figures charged with European imagination but bereft of their own narratives, thus attesting only to the Eurocentric preoccupation with and genocidal eradication of “aberrant” bodies and sexualities. It is impossible to break the silence of the archive and retell their stories; they are, in the words of Saidiya Hartman (2008: 2), “an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.” But rather than being a register of death and terror, a metaphorical tomb, as Hartman describes the archives of transatlantic slavery (2), a glaring emptiness seems to await those who enter the archives of European sexology.

This is especially true in the case of Austria. Now a small nation-state in the middle of Western Europe upholding claims to neutrality and noninvolvement concerning the violent histories of modernity, it perpetuates a national narrative of its past greatness as an “Empire without colonies.” Whereas Austria is seldomly mentioned within the origin narrative of trans studies, or European sexology more general, Austrian scientists were heavily involved in the knowledge production around sexuality and gender in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Likewise, the Viennese Institut für Sexualforschung—akin to Hirschfeld’s Institut für Sexualwissenschaften in Berlin, but in contrast largely forgotten—offered consultations and lectures open to a network of aspiring sexologists. Most importantly, the institute served as a museum and held one of the largest sexological archives at the time, the records ranging from publications, personal diaries, to a big ethnological collection—most likely accumulated through colonial travels. Yet the original archive is lost, and the few records attesting to the mere existence of the institute are scattered.

Confronted with these epistemological limits, how can we read these seemingly empty archives? What kind of historical thinking in, with, and through

the archives is possible in view of these limitations? How can we attend to those impossible histories that the archives are built on but which they refuse to reveal? And what can a trans* perspective contribute to these questions?

Within trans studies and trans(*) activism, the asterisk is, though fiercely contested, mostly employed according to its wildcard function to denote an inclusive—and often times highly Eurocentric and universalist—gesture toward multiple gender identities, which otherwise may not be represented under a single umbrella term. Instead of this identity-based and gender-oriented usage, a range of scholars have poetically argued for the analytical power of *trans** given its unique symbolism and semantics (Hayward 2008; Hayward and Weinstein 2015; Bey 2017). Similarly poetic but less concerned with its semantics and symbolism, Hartman and Sharpe offer a different reading of the asterisk. In their respective works, the asterisk comes to signify the position of the unspoken and unspeakable. As asterisk in the history of modernity, it does not only mark the stories erased that are impossible to retell (Hartman 2008), but as the “asterisked human” (Sharpe 2016: 110), it also stands in for Blackness as the ontological non-zone underwriting white conceptions of the Human. Shifting the focus of the asterisk, their Black feminist theoretical offerings open the possibility to think (with and into) the silenced sounds of the asterisk: listening for the unsaid, the gaps, the “black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity” (Hartman 2008: 12) while refusing to expose them to “a second order of violence” (5) by way of forcing them into the impossible sound of a reconstructed narrative.

While recognizing the danger of annexing Black feminist thought all over again, I believe that Sharpe’s and Hartman’s theorizing of the asterisk and/in the Trans* Atlantic is of utter importance for the provincializing of trans studies as well as its underlying European origin narrative even, or rather especially, when faced with a seemingly empty archive. Understanding the asterisk not only as a space holder but also as a steady reminder of the silenced yet fundamentally constitutive narratives rendered impossible by the violence of the archives might have the radical potential to unearth the racial conditions of trans* epistemologies and thus work with and through the archives that otherwise render whiteness as the origin of all History. Phonetically, the asterisk is unvoiced; scratching in the throat, it refuses to be spoken, as dominant culture does not provide a language for its vocalizing. As we try to speak the asterisk, the glottis closes, literally preventing sound to escape.⁴ Thus *trans** becomes *tuænz*, the asterisk swallowed by its own unspeakability.⁵ But queer experience, especially in heavily gendered languages such as German where the asterisk is used to hold space between two gendered endings of a noun (e.g., in *Freund*in*), has taught us that it is possible to recognize the closing of the glottis, to hear the silence of the asterisk, and understand it as a signifier of a story untold, an impossible subject position within

dominant language. With this in mind, I want to return to the *TransTrans* exhibition once more, asking what it might mean to listen for the (non)sound of the asterisk to revisit the silence in the archives.

Empty Archives, Full of Rats: Multiple Trans* Horizons in *Der Steinachfilm*

Despite the seemingly empty archives, Austria's capital has been given a prominent place on the *TransTrans Network Wall* (see fig. 1), represented through one of the best-known physicians and endocrinologists of the early twentieth century, Eugen Steinach (1861–1944). From 1912 until he left Vienna in 1938, he conducted his research on “puberty glands” and “inner secretions” as the director of the recently established Institute for Experimental Biology. In many ways, his work paved the way for current understandings of hormone replacement therapies and medical transitioning. Not only did his collaboration with Schering Pharmaceuticals eventually lead to the discovery of the chemical structure of estrogen by his successors, but his experiments on “artificial sex reversals” were highly influential and widely received, not least by Hirschfeld and Benjamin, with whom Steinach engaged in a long, if at times adversarial, relationship.

The experiments consisted in the transplantation of ovarian tissue into the abdominal cavity of male rats and guinea pigs, which, according to Steinach, were “feminized” (*feminiert*) by the procedure, as he believed to have observed not only the development of female sex characteristics in the animals but also a distinct female behavior. Similarly, he transplanted testicles into female animals, “masculinizing” them. This, to Steinach, proved his theory of the immense power of the “inner secretions,” or hormones, as substances capable of not only modifying the body but also transforming the psychological and behavioral characteristics of his nonhuman patients. Indeed, to Steinach, “inner secretions” were so fundamental that he considered them “the hub of life itself” (Steinach and Loebel 1940: 5). However, before his research was exposed to ridicule heavily soaked in antisemitic commentary, his fame was largely due to the establishment of a surgical procedure promising rejuvenation. Based on the idea that “a man is as old as his endocrine glands” (164), he believed that aging was due to a ceased circulation of “inner secretions” rendering the body less flexible and less plastic and claimed that—at least for men—vasectomies were the answer to restore youth and vigor. In the interwar period, “with scores of injured veterans on the streets and a psyche damaged by the humiliation of defeat” (Makela 2015: 50), this promise attracted thousands of people. Eventually, it became so popular that his name was simply turned into a verb; “one did not have a vasectomy, but was ‘versteinacht’ (Steinached),” as Maria Makela notes (50).

Steinach's work was further popularized by the feature-length documentary *Der Steinachfilm*, which was on display in the *TransTrans* exhibition.

Produced by Curt Thomalla in 1923 and celebrated as an “event for science,” *Der Steinachfilm* consists of six parts or, rather, “problems,” as the film itself declares them. First, it takes on the question of external and internal sex characteristics in animals and humans. In a seemingly endless array of juxtaposed images of male and female animals, the film points to the visible differences of sex, culminating in the juxtaposition of a man standing on a rock in a loincloth holding a spear and a woman in a flowy dress with flowers in her hair fetching water at a lake. Already in this first set of images, the film establishes the analogization of humans and animals that is central to its visual argumentation as well as its heteronormative underpinnings. The second “problem” turns to Steinach’s research explaining the effects of “inner secretions.” Arguing for the importance of “inner secretions” for every aspect of human development, the film displays a set of images framed as “degenerations” caused by an imbalance of “inner secretions.” Interspersed with short clips evoking an everyday atmosphere, the camera measures and exposes, as the patients are undressed down to a piece of cloth covering their genitals, turning them around to capture their “abnormalities” from every angle. Thus it is impossible to distinguish the medical gaze of the clinic from the voyeuristic desire of the freak show (Herrn and Brinckmann 2017: 221).

The third and fourth chapters of the film address the plasticity and malleability of sex. Again, starting with animals, the film recreates Steinach’s experimental sex reversals, thus allowing the audience to witness the surgical procedure and observe the effects of “femination” (*Feminierung*) and “masculation” (*Masculierung*). Each result further evidenced through a staged comparison with “normal” and castrated control animals, the viewers are afforded the privileged viewing position of the scientists as they are guided to evaluate the seemingly altered fur, size, and skeletons of the “feminized” and “masculized” rats and guinea pigs. Proceeding from the objectified medical evidence of the animal bodies, the film claims that “inner secretions” also determine sexual behavior by showing a “feminized” guinea pig, which—in the words of the film—has become “a caring mother” as it tries to breastfeed the offspring. The ultimate evidence of the successful “sex reversal” is represented as it is put into a cage with a male member of the species who—the film suggests—is so compelled by the realness of the “feminized” guinea pig that it chases after it and tries to mount it.

Crucially, the chapter that follows does not repeat the animal-to-human analogization quite in the same logic but, rather, reverses it. The chapter starts with the diagnostic assessment that a combination of female and male physiological as well as psychological characteristics can be found in certain human “types.” These types, of course, are the result of “inner secretions.” Showcasing a series of medical images comparing “normal” forms of embodiment to “masculine” women and “feminine” men, hips, shoulders, and muscles are constructed

to signify their sexual and gender deviance. Then, the film goes on to produce more performative representations of the “intermediaries,” even though the spectators are assured that these images are, in fact, not reenacted but, rather, represent medically examined cases. Given the sheer absurdity of what follows, this is implausible to say the least. Starting with two sequences of homosexual archetypes—two “effeminate men,” who groom, stitch, and caress each other, and a “mannish woman,” who smokes and reads—the film works up the suspense toward “men who become women” and “women who become men” with several cross-fading double images of the same person in full attire and naked to reveal the supposed incongruity between the “natural body” and the outward appearance. Those double images at once echo the clinical gaze of medical textbook and cater to the voyeurism and sexual fantasies of the spectators. These fantasies become abundantly clear in the last set of images presenting “cases” of physiological intermediaries: a carrier driver grooms a horse, then, putting the brush aside, turns around and leans against the horse with both arms stretched out almost as if crucified; when the picture dissolves, the person, still in the same pose leaning against the horse, is suddenly naked except for the medical cloth covering their genitals. With their breasts exposed to the camera and their head resting on the horse’s back, the “transspecies intimacy” (Szczygielska 2017: 63) is suddenly charged with sexual fantasies, revealing the blurring of the medical and voyeuristic gaze once more. To maintain the objective claim of the film, the chapter then turns to a series of animated drawings and surgical documentaries while claiming that “in some cases, successful surgery was able to correct the abnormality.”

By ending on the note of the possible treatment of gender and sexual deviance, the film reverses its analogical pattern according to which a phenomenon is first shown in animals and then, following the same narrative arc, is conveyed to humans. Whereas the “artificial sex reversals” in rats and guinea pigs are celebrated as a scientific triumph over nature, a sign of progress and modernity, the depicted humans are constructed as developmental errors, deviant, and in need of a cure. This reversed logic becomes especially apparent as the last two chapters of the film heavily reinforce the anthropomorphic analogy in discussing the possibilities of rejuvenation. The chapters court future patients by first demonstrating in rats, then in men,⁶ the successful restoration of their youthfulness and vigor. Ending with the image of a formerly frail, now rejuvenated white man on top of a mountain peak—an image speaking simultaneously to hegemonic masculinity as well as colonial conquest, as Patricia Purtschert (2019) has observed—the film caters to the utopian desires and the reinforcement of white supremacy and heteronormativity in a time characterized by public feelings of depression, anxiety, and defeat, as rejuvenation is not only promised to

individuals “but also for their families, their countries, and the world“ (Steinach and Loebel 1940: 272).

Nonetheless, the images of “feminized” and “masculized” rats and guinea pigs were also glimmering representations of a hopeful trans* horizon, discernible by those who longed for the modification of their bodies and the recognition of their gendered selves. While Steinach’s proclaimed “wish-fulfillment for humanity” (94) might have pointed toward the reaffirmation of the colonial gender binary and heteronormative normalization, they saw a different utopia come to life before their eyes. After learning about Steinach’s experiments, they contacted their respective doctors, asking for similar procedures and thus taking the initiative to demand the pharmaceutical and surgical interventions that shaped the medicalization of transsexuality in the years to come (Herrn 2005: 107). Yet it is important to bear in mind that such trans*species identifications might not have been available to everyone, as they attest to the “privileges of the position from which one is able to imagine such transgression” (Szczygielska 2017: 76). Given the cultural significance of rodents, especially the figure of the rat, as parasitic carriers of plagues and diseases not seldom deployed as a metaphor for racial dehumanization, those imaginations might have been available only to those who could identify *with* rats without being identified *as* rats. However, it is important to note that Steinach, who himself was Jewish and thus would be soon equated with rats, too, had high regard for the rodents he experimented on, even expressing gratitude toward them as his scientific contributors (Steinach and Loebel 1940: 31), which points to the entangled histories of colonial discourses, anti-Semitism, and Nazi ideology this article does not address. Nevertheless, the potentially radical trans* horizon the film offers is undermined not only by the question of who might have had access to the film’s imaginary but further, and maybe even more crucially, by the question of who had access to the film in the first place, who felt entitled to contact doctors afterward, and who was likely to receive the sought treatment.⁷

However, regarding the asterisked histories of modernity, these are not the only trans* horizons the film offers. The first scene of the film places Steinach at his laboratory in the Institute for Experimental Biology. The institute itself was located at the Vivarium, a former aquarium in the middle of the Viennese Prater, which was originally built for the World’s Fair in 1873 and redesignated as a research facility at the turn of the century. While the laboratory was a replica built for *Der Steinachfilm*, the scene opens with original footage of the Vivarium, the emblematic Viennese Ferris wheel protruding in the back. Filmed from the outside looking in, the camera hides the reversed perspective of what Steinach and his colleagues likely saw when they went to work on their pioneering experiments. In the early twentieth century the Viennese Prater, a former imperial hunting

ground that was opened to the public in 1776, was a place of entertainment, popular culture, as well as social experimentation and negotiation. In 1873 the World's Fair led to a spatial reorganization but also cultural transformation of the area, establishing it as a place constituted by voyeuristic looks in which the fascination with and abjection of otherness played a central role. Since then, "freak shows" and "human zoos" were a regular component of the entertainment culture in the Viennese Prater. The dehumanizing and objectifying staging of differences central to these human exhibitions certainly echoes in the gaze produced in *Der Steinachfilm*.

But while those entanglements only shimmer beneath the surface of the film's composition, the enmeshment of Steinach's research with colonial knowledge production becomes more explicit in the establishment of his theories about climate, sex differences, and heredity, which build the background foil for the film's visual argument. Less popularized than his theories about "rejuvenation" and "artificial sex change"—which, implicated in the eugenics project of the twentieth century, are, as Kadji Amin (2018: 593) argues, part of the "disturbing genealogy of transgender"—are Steinach's experiments with "heat rats." In 1920, only three years prior to the film's release, Steinach published a lengthy research paper, together with his colleague Paul Kammerer, entitled "Climate and Virility" ("Klima und Mannbarkeit"). Trying to prove the heredity of acquired characteristics, thus countering growing eugenics ideology, they based their argument on Steinach's experiments with rats held in thermal cages. Steinach believed he observed a difference in the development of sex characteristics as well as the sexual behavior of the animals, caused by a heat-induced alteration of the "inner secretions." The rats were described as hypersexualized with large genitals and an increased sex drive while also being framed as lacking somatic sexual differentiation. Those differences, according to Steinach and Kammerer, were not only acquired through the surrounding heat or climate but, crucial to the argument of the authors, also passed on to the next generation of rats, regardless whether they were raised in thermal cages or not. In the second, much more voluminous part of the paper, the authors go on to link their findings to an extensive review of anthropological literature aiming to provide anthropology's observations with "a secure basis" through the use of biology's objective and "modern methods" (Steinach and Kammerer 1920: 411). This paper makes abundantly clear who is placed in proximity to animality and who is not, as they compare the "heat rats" to "populations living in warmer climates," reinstating the European colonial imaginary in which binary sexual differentiation is seen as a signifier not only of civilization, development, and modernity but also of what it means to be human. While the paper aims to debunk those differences as (merely) determined by race, it reinforces colonial discourses under the guise of climatic differences as it

distinguishes between bodies that are able to be affected and assimilate to the climatic environment, thus acquiring new characteristics, and those who are less plastic, less malleable, and more persistent in their (racial) determination. Those differences were distributed along the lines of northern (read: white bodies) and southern (read: Black and Brown bodies) climates, thus pointing to the racial underpinnings of the idea of plasticity so central to the malleability of sexed embodiment (Gill-Peterson 2017).

A joint reading of *Der Steinachfilm* and “Climate and Virility” offers a glimpse of the ideologies of modernity as well as the unspoken and erased histories substantiating the condensation of transgender into a recognizable category. Thus such a reading does not only allude to transgender horizons within the archive, but it makes visible their entanglements with the asterisked histories of enslavement and colonialism, which are both commonly believed to be something that happened elsewhere—a tragedy, a reprehensive endeavor, an unethical chapter in history at most—but without any impact on Europe, much less Austria. “Austria’s entanglement,” as Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski (2018: 85) writes, “with histories of enslavement and colonialism is not simply forgotten but actively suppressed.” Listening for the unspoken and unspeakable asterisk within the film allows us to work against that suppression.

Given the asterisked histories constitutive of the archives of European sexology, medicine, and endocrinology as well as the (anti-)foundational status of these archives for trans studies itself, a reading that foregrounds the interplay of historical subjectivation and desubjectivation puts pressure on the epistemological grounding of trans studies as “desubjugated knowledge” (Stryker 2006), as desubjugation paradoxically requires subjugation and subjectivation as its precondition. While desubjugation as a mode of critique might be available to all subjects, subjectivity is not available to all bodies (Purtschert 2016)—instead, the animalized, the exoticized, and the thingified are historically marked by desubjectivation. Taking the call to provincialize seriously, we need to apply it to the very core of trans studies itself and, to deliberately misread another canonical text, “take responsibility for all of [our] history” (Stone 2006: 232) to decenter and transform its epistemological foundations. This must not only include querying the uneasy relationship of transgender to the violent histories of modernity forming the basis for its categorical becoming but also further consider the limitations of desubjugation as a mode of knowing. Inserting the asterisk in *TransTrans* to reopen the void might allow us to attune to the entangled silences and erased histories not accounted for, so that we may rethink the relation between transgender, the Atlantic, colonialism, and Europe without necessarily being able to fill the gap with intelligible sound.

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Notes

1. The exhibition was curated by Alex Bakker, Rainer Herrn, Michael Thomas Taylor, and Annette F. Timm and on display between November 2019 and March 2020.
2. In 2016 the exhibition, which was then called *Trans Trans—Transgender Histories between Germany and the United States, 1882–1966*, was on display at the Nickle Galleries in Calgary. While most of the artifacts in Berlin appear to be identical, it becomes apparent that the main difference is the discursive shift of the title.
3. Most prominently discussed around the event “The Milieu of the Dead” at the Humboldt Forum Berlin in 2017. Rather than dealing with the concerns raised by invited speakers Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman, the organizers used the discussion to raise the question about the handling of the Humboldt Forum’s ethnographic collections—the restitution of which continues to be denied. Thus, instead of engaging with the afterlife of slavery, the long durée of violence, and the spectacle of Black suffering, the organizers tried to twist and use Black feminist critique for their own purposes. Culminating in protest, the event was hastily closed.
 However, this trend by far not only affects cultural institutions but is equally reflected in German-speaking academia, thus threatening to become the latest incarnation of the appropriation and narrowing of Black knowledge production by white institutions as seen before in discussions around intersectionality and decolonization.
4. I am aware that this holds true only for oral languages, while computer-based voice outputs as well as augmented and alternative communication devices might indeed voice the asterisk, indicating a much-needed discussion around the intersections of trans*, disability, and language.
5. For this insight I am especially indebted to Simon Noa Harder’s (2020) theoretical and artistic work on the multifaceted theoretical figure of *Stimmlos* and the ambivalent zones it denotes.
6. In women, rejuvenation was considered possible through the irradiation of their ovaries.
7. Here, I am particularly indebted to the insightful comments of the reviewers.

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