

**Oliver Moore**

## The Importance of a Forward-Looking Trans Poetics

DURING THE FIRST wave of queer American politics in the 1950s and '60s, queer poetry was, as Eric Keenaghan writes, “regularly included in nationally circulated activist publications.”<sup>1</sup> From its very beginnings, then, queer poetics has focused on relating experiences and affirming identities. As Keenaghan continues, these early activist publications “helped raise other LGBT individuals’ consciousness that a queer community could exist because others had similar experiences.” Moreover, for many of the poets and writers who produced these pamphlets,

self-expression had to be coupled with an impulse to construct, to reimagine one’s social and political world, because minority life, as it was known in later decades, simply did not exist.<sup>2</sup>

Not only must the political begin with the personal, then, but so must the *poetical* begin in this same way. And a queer poetics in particular must always draw attention to human rights abuses and experiences of oppression by individuals, for being alive and

queer is an inherently political act.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in queer poetry, there is a tendency toward autobiography, a tendency that recognises how lived experience is the most important tool in understanding oppression.<sup>4</sup> Articulating a sense of shared lived experience becomes a mode of creating communities; and, in turn, the poetics produced by these communities reflects the everyday reality of queer lives.

The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to works by transgender (or “trans”) poets and to illustrate the way in which these works are always inherently tied to a project that might dubiously be called “queer progress,” one that orients itself to the advancement of the rights of the queer community. More specifically, I will examine the pairing of the poetic and the political in the work of trans poets Steph Burt, Alok Vaid-Menon, and Joshua Jennifer Espinoza. Each of these poets focuses on a different project of rights-based activism, using poetry as a means both to respond to and transcode the manifold struggles facing the LGBTQIA+ community.

Queer poetics are focused on multiple reclamations—on the reclamation of rights, of lives, and of language. Drawing on postcolonial language theory, Bruce Boone finds gay language to be “a *coded* language—whose opposition is expressed only in ‘deformed’ or distorted fashion.”<sup>5</sup> This point about codes, which itself implies the possibility of “code-switching,” is furthered by Michael Dowdy, who writes that

code-switching not only reflects the reader’s experiences and serves as a means to establishing and recognising group identity, it is a strategic, creative device for activating a specific type of poetic agency.<sup>6</sup>

Interrogations of language after Dowdy have added to Boone’s original work. According to poet and critic Trish Salah, language is violent in its production; while, for Gayle Salamon, language permits only an obfuscation of identity.<sup>7</sup> These contributions confirm Boone’s assertion that “a sense of community is produced by referring to certain traditional artefacts of the community.”<sup>8</sup> By speaking with the words of a marginalised group, and by

continually referring to that group's history, the community is not just preserved but strengthened. Indeed, the notion that a community is built around its materials, its "artefacts," has continued to hold true for contemporary queer poetics, and especially for transgender poetics in the twenty-first century.

Despite the multitude of complex political issues that face the queer community, queer poetics are not exclusively concerned with queer political issues. Keenaghan finds that rather than focusing solely on matters of interest to queer poets, "contemporary queer poets . . . tend to use their LGBT identities as springboards for poetically addressing issues which affect all populations." It is for this reason, Keenaghan argues, that these authors deploy the term "queer" rather than "LGBT," for instance, as the former term "tends to challenge rigid and potentially divisive identity logics so as to forge new connections and alliances between communities and groups."<sup>9</sup> In practice (as well as theory), Keenaghan's theory holds true, for the many issues with which queer poetics concerns itself are also at the forefront of poetic expression and expansion more generally, and not confined to the needs, interests, or prerogatives of queer poets and poetics only. Ian Brinton points to the importance within queer poetics of the dismissal of and resistance to binaries such as black/white, gay/straight, man/woman, and Nerys Williams similarly notes the influence of "identity politics—the categorisation of different groups according to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation—[which has] found a fertile and often recuperative role in contemporary poetry."<sup>10</sup> All of this highlights the importance of considering contemporary queer poetics as a means of drawing attention to the broader work of identity politics, a subject more often associated with the politics of race or with feminism than with queer writing.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, conceiving of queer poetics in this way allows us to pay close attention to the particular modes of interrogation and disavowal in this work while also acknowledging the common practices of resistance that queer poetry shares with other "non-queer" writings and poetics.

Given the broader aims of queer politics outlined above, a queer poetics does and must also be a trans poetics. Trans poets employ a number of poetic strategies and tools to enter the discourse: they commonly destabilise inherently violent and erasive language, employ coded language that operates through artefacts and lived experience, and borrow from trauma theory, recognising that, as Roger Luckhurst notes, “extremity and survival are privileged markers of identity.”<sup>12</sup> All queer poetries, and especially trans poetries, are predicated on the history of trauma and violence that has preceded them, even if this is not explicit in the poems themselves. For transfeminine Asian-American poet Alok Vaid-Menon, for instance, central to the task of constructing a trans poetics is remembering violence: both that which has gone before, and that which is ongoing. As I will show below, Vaid-Menon’s work is temporally fixed and situated, in that it is frequently published online and in immediate response to events which directly impact the queer community. And the trans woman poet Joshua Jennifer Espinoza works in a similar way, publishing her poetry both on her blog in immediate response to current events—notably in response to the murders of trans women—and in print.

For other trans poets, such as Trace Peterson and Steph Burt, the way forward is through the more traditional methods of publishing their poetry in books and maintaining ongoing academic relationships with trans poetry groups. In her essay “Becoming A Trans Poet” of 2014, Peterson draws attention to the neglect of trans poets in literary criticism:

At the time of writing this article, I am not aware of previous work in scholarly journals about “trans poets” as a specific category. So I believe this is the first article on trans poets authored by a trans academic and published in a peer-reviewed journal.<sup>13</sup>

Peterson goes on to differentiate between reviews of individual poets or poems and critical or scholarly attempts to read across writers and construct something approximating a canon of trans poetics. This work has garnered critical attention in recent years,

with the 2013 publication of the first anthology of trans poetry, *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetics*, and an infamous *New York Times* profile of Burt, an established literary scholar and Harvard professor of English, provocatively titled “Poetry’s Cross-Dressing Kingmaker” by author Mark Oppenheimer.<sup>14</sup> After the article appeared in 2012, Burt’s public profile rose, increasing the visibility of their queerness. As trans people like Burt gain greater visibility in society, mainstream attitudes change and transform; indeed, trans poets have been instrumental in catalysing this process.<sup>15</sup>

Scholars and poets alike have posited some of the common themes in trans poetry. In her short creative essay of 2009, “In Lieu of a Trans Poetics,” Trish Salah notes that trans poetry often focuses on the body and that, like trans bodies, its poetic features are always in the process of becoming, specifically through “unfixing” and “unmaking.” She compares the development of trans poetry to the development of the body and mind into adulthood: “Like adolescence, it’s so gay, actually.”<sup>16</sup> But Salah also conceives of trans poetry as essentially liberalising: not only is it resistant to hegemonic binaries, she writes, but fundamentally concerned with combating the structures that oppress trans people. And yet, Salah also suggests that trans poetry has the potential, like “writing history,” to be “hysterical,” and to construct texts that move “between subject and abject.”<sup>17</sup> In many ways, Salah’s abstracted distinction between “subject” and “abject” captures both the complexity and the mission of contemporary trans politics and poetics; it is a fight to be viewed no longer as abject and to move into the realm of the subject—that is, to be conferred agency as individuals, to be recognised and validated.<sup>18</sup> As with the political aims of trans people, trans poets and trans poetics are manifestly concerned with the immediate improvement of trans rights.

In the introduction to *Troubling the Line*, editors Tolbert and Peterson write of trans poetry as a mode that is diverse and irreducible, continually “challenging the idea of a single trans narrative, interrogating binaries of all sorts, and playing with, delighting in, explorations (explosions) of form.”<sup>19</sup> Peterson, writing

elsewhere, finds formal exploration to be a common preoccupation among trans poets. Trans poetry, he writes,

exhibits an ego-dystonic sense of undertow. The poems destabilize or sabotage an idealized sense of self in the articulation of that self. They explore experimental linguistic strategies, reaching beyond biography toward extreme fictional elements [to] push the borders of genre.<sup>20</sup>

In the argot of psychoanalysis, to be egodystonic is to have thoughts that are dissonant or in conflict with one's needs and goals, and to behave in ways that contradict both one's ego and ideal self-image.<sup>21</sup> The concept of egodystonia encapsulates the complex mental territory that the experience of gender dysphoria—and the process of writing about it—maps. The literary scholar Michael Dowdy has highlighted the disconnect between ego and enactment, noting the importance of agent-centred “I” poetry, which can create a political space that has agency and an actor behind it. As he writes, seeing “identity as activated in and through action,” allows us to notice how “Action does not express a preexisting identity,” but, “rather, action creates and forms identity.”<sup>22</sup>

While the notion that taking action helps to propel a subject into being is both persuasive and familiar, actually taking action can be particularly difficult for subjects whose bodies do not straightforwardly align with their gender identity, such as those who identify as trans. In many ways, those who experience conflicting drives are among the most at risk of falling prey to the dangers of language. In a later book section on migratory agency in Latina/o poetry, Dowdy writes of “subjects [who are] split not only between languages, but also between their bodies and the actions their bodies perform,” capturing the difficult circumstances in which migrants face the “exclusion or erasure of one language via the ‘mastery’ or primacy of another.”<sup>23</sup> But Dowdy's description of the split subject—of the egodystonic subject with conflicting drives—is also an apt description of the trans poet's position.<sup>24</sup> Of course, for the trans poet, by contrast, it is the “exclusion or erasure” of one *body* via the primacy of another that

is difficult to navigate; and the sense of being “split” arises in the course of confronting the actions and needs of a body that differs from the subject’s primary “ipseity,” or sense of self.<sup>25</sup>

Whereas I have suggested a trans poetics might focus on the body, and on the conflict that arises in the course of the trans poet’s engagement with their body, Peterson suggests that trans poetry often “avoids directly presenting a narrative about being trans,” and that, although “it appears” in some poems, it is usually “not the focus of the work.”<sup>26</sup> While Peterson’s point will prove to be at least partly true for the selection of poets I examine below, I will also show that the work that these poets do—to politicise their personal narratives and to detail their experiences with the ego—also serves to make their trans identities more visible. In other words, through various linguistic clues or implicative references, which a reader fluent in the coded language of the queer community would recognise, trans poets often *do* make narratives about being trans central to their work, even if it is not in an explicit way. My argument is thus in line with Boone’s assertion that gay language is coded, and must be so, due to the predominant, hegemonic language of the “dominating group.” As he writes,

it has become historically evident that a new linguistic-cultural problematic is shaped when oppressed groups find themselves under the necessity of speaking not only (or only partly) their own language but the language of another, dominating group. The language of an oppressed group in such circumstances tends to become a coded language—whose opposition is expressed only in “deformed” or distorted fashion.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, while this argument accords with queer speech acts more broadly, it is especially cogent in the case of trans poetry. As a segment of the queer community who, according to various studies, are more likely to face discrimination and violence than their queer peers, trans subjects are also arguably more likely to employ a coded language, and one that is even more encoded and abstracted than those used by the queer community in general.<sup>28</sup>

Turning now to the work of Alok Vaid-Menon, I want to examine the role that political speech acts play in their poetry. But first, it is notable that, in the State of the Union address on January 20, 2015, then President Barack Obama, highlighting the importance of “human dignity,” said,

That’s why we defend free speech, and advocate for political prisoners, and condemn the persecution of women, or religious minorities, or people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. We do these things not only because they’re right, but because they make us safer.<sup>29</sup>

Not just an important message, the statement also marked the first time that the word transgender had been said in a State of the Union address.<sup>30</sup> However, in their poetic response to the address, Vaid-Menon draws attention to the fact that merely mentioning the discrimination and prejudice faced by trans people is ineffective, and suggests that taking active steps—such as strengthening anti-discrimination law—would be more important, particularly in the case of hate crimes against trans people. In “girls wear blue; boys wear pinkwashing,” published on Vaid-Menon’s personal website, they employ repeated strains to draw on the traumas of the trans community:

not the trans people raped and killed by the military  
not the trans people raped and killed by the police  
not the trans people raped and discarded by the state<sup>31</sup>

The work of trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman has suggested that enunciative acts of repetition in the context of trauma—and especially when that trauma is ongoing and compounding—might enable a traumatised person to survive through their grief and distress, particularly by allowing them to find ways to bear witness to and integrate their trauma into their personal identity.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, Vaid-Menon’s repeated phrasing may be interpreted as an attempt to integrate these traumatic events, at the same time as it serves to highlight the abiding recurrence of these tragedies. As Felman suggests, by opening ourselves up

to the voices from the past—to the voices that often “live” in the present, and sometimes literally so in an age of immersive digital media—we may find ways to redress both trauma and violence.<sup>33</sup> Vaid-Menon’s poem additionally makes clear who they view as the perpetrators of violence against the trans community, explicitly naming the military but notably modifying the word “killed” in the final line so as to stop short of asserting that trans people have been murdered by “the state” itself. By substituting “killed” with “discarded,” Vaid-Menon not only implies the state’s negligence (rather than its criminality), but alludes to an older, less common definition of the word, namely “Of a person: dismissed from employment, deprived of office, discharged.”<sup>34</sup> In this sense, the word discarded implies the more systemic and structural prejudices that trans people face in American society.

Later in the same poem, Vaid-Menon employs repetition, sometimes called *conduplicatio* in studies of poetic rhetoric, to affirm their allegiance to their “sisters.” Just how that allegiance might be expressed remains unsaid. However, it is worth noting that, if Vaid-Menon had been unfortunate enough to bear witness to violence against a trans person, their witness testimony—and therefore their allegiance—may well be fruitless or ineffective. This is because criminal charges are rarely laid in these matters, with only six percent of the total number anti-LGBT crimes reported to the police in 2013 resulting in the laying of charges on accuseds.<sup>35</sup> Inverting America’s exceptionalism narrative, Vaid-Menon draws on the rhetoric of nationalism, contrasting it with an encoded or codified signifier:

so i will not pledge allegiance to the trans tipping point...  
i will not pledge allegiance to the trans tipping point...  
i will not pledge allegiance to the trans tipping point...  
i pledge allegiance to my sisters!  
i pledge allegiance to my sisters!  
i pledge allegiance to my sisters!

The “trans tipping point” is a reference to Katy Steinmetz’s article of May, 2014, published in *TIME* magazine, titled “The Transgender Tipping Point.”<sup>36</sup> In that article, Steinmetz highlighted the

progress that had been made in the trans community in terms of attaining more visibility; however, the article was received poorly within the queer and trans communities, with many seeing it not only as an attempt to sweep ongoing trans-related issues aside, but as an essay that fetishised the former identities of trans people, including those of the subjects Steinmetz interviewed. In Vaid-Menon's poem, the word "sisters" refers to trans women exclusively; a highly codified term, "sisters" is frequently used in the queer community as a way for people, many of them trans women, to collectively identify, recognise, and confront the experience of being excluded from womanhood, both in history and in the present.

By subverting nationalist rhetoric but employing the repeated, sloganistic exclamations characteristic of the protest chant, Vaid-Menon foregrounds the importance of developing a trans community. The poem draws distinct lines between "us," by which they mean the trans community, and "them," by which the poet presumably means those who are neither trans identifying nor political allied with trans people. Later, Vaid-Menon goes so far as to outline a vision of a trans-friendly world, employing the word "trans" itself as a kind of metonym or synonym for "utopia" or "dream":

our trans means the end of imperialism  
our trans means the end of militarism  
our trans means the end of police  
our trans means the end of borders  
our trans means the end of the white man's house

In these lines, Vaid-Menon renames the military as a source of violence against the trans community, but now associates militarism with the perils of imperial rule and the paternalistic history of white occupation. The expression white man's house—a pun on the White House—calls attention to what was, when the poem was written, the fact that an African American president occupied the White House, subtly alluding to one way in which the "end of the white man's house" might have already occurred. These lines, which appear at the close of the poem, follow an earlier

line that subtly alludes to the illegitimacy of the White House by referring to “the red earth this house is settled on.” Of course, the word “red” has been associated with Native Americans in both pejorative ways, as in “redskin,” and in empowering forms, as in “red land” and “red power.”<sup>37</sup> Here the word “red earth” alludes to both these forms while remaining so codified, so encoded, as to signify neither explicitly.

In different ways, both Salah and Peterson point to the role that trans poetry plays in both naming and disrupting binaries. Vaid-Menon’s lines are a case in point, not only because they directly interrogate gender binaries but because they construct new dialectics too—syntactic dyads that reframe the orthodox oppositions between male and female, black and white:

when visibility for some means  
vilification for most  
when lip service for some means  
life sentence for most  
when acknowledgment for some means  
annihilation for most

Here, binaries emerge in the form of visibility/vilification, lip service/life sentence, and acknowledgement/annihilation. The apparent arbitrariness of these oppositions is resolved by the phonetic and visual similarities between the words—not to mention that they are alliterative—and this highlights not only the arbitrariness of all dichotomous categorisations but indicates the primacy that the poet imputes to sonic and graphemic effects. In addition, that Vaid-Menon uses violent-sounding terms to construct these binaries reminds us of the potential for violence that is inherent in all such dualisms: the poet’s binaries thus mimic the violence central to all binary gender designation. By using a coded language, Vaid-Menon not only interrogates gender binaries and destabilises the American imperialist narrative, but creates a space in which identity can be built from within the transgender community; not from the words and tools of its oppressors.

Writing again in response to an event—in this case, the anniversary of 9/11—Vaid-Menon expands on their conception of the American national consciousness and its interactions with race, gender, and the changing nature of warfare—topics that Brinton identifies as axiomatic for contemporary poetry.<sup>38</sup> Williams has similarly noted poetry’s seemingly inexorable relationship with war, noting that “poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has had to learn how to ethically address and represent brutality and war, from inter-ethnic conflict to global warfare.”<sup>39</sup> In a poem titled “when a birth certificate hijacks a body and tells it to speak or forever hold its peace,” Vaid-Menon draws a direct line between the violence of warfare (of all kinds) and the violence of gender binary:

would you accept me if i told you  
my gender came from violence?  
because sometimes i wonder  
if there would be gender if there  
was no violence<sup>40</sup>

As well as addressing the violence (both metaphorical and literal) inherent in the process by which a specific gender designation is forced on a subject, these lines explore the way gender stereotypes contribute to violence. For the poet, violence and gender are inseparable. In a striking chiasmus, the poet suggests that, just as an act of violence must be done in order for gender to exist—whether that act is one of language, of physical modification (as in the surgeries performed on intersex babies<sup>41</sup>), or of social control—so must gender be ascribed in order for later acts of violence to arise.

Vaid-Menon’s “when a birth certificate” is further concerned with the impact that the global threat of terrorism has had on identity formation, both in terms of gender and otherwise. As a member of Generation Y, or what Sunaina Marr Maira has called the “9/11 Generation,” Vaid-Menon is familiar with violence and warfare.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, “when a birth certificate” sees the poet muse on the intersections between race and gender in a climate of post-9/11 violence:

flying away from man because  
he brown  
he !

Here, the movement from full sentences to truncated, incomplete phrases is perhaps partly an allusion to African American vernacular English (AAVE), and partly a significant strategy that serves to illustrate the fragmentation of identity at the heart of most gender- nonconforming people's lived experience.<sup>43</sup> Earlier in the poem, the speaker muses on the assignment of race at birth: "what would it mean to say / that i was assigned brown at birth?" Clearly, the lines reference the expression "assigned male at birth" or "assigned female at birth," which are commonly used in medical settings and trans communities as a means of "objectively" identifying a subject's gender genealogy. However, in this line, the poet brings race into play, and so identifies it as just another categorisation that is developed by the assigner rather than the assignee, rhetorically challenging the notions of assignment and assignation more broadly. Echoing the earlier lines in which the poet wondered "if there would be gender if there / was no violence," now the poet expresses a similar pondering:

sometimes i  
wonder if there would be brown  
if there were no plane

Here, the image of the "plane," which presumably refers to the events of 9/11, is a striking metonym, not least because we know that not just one but four aircraft were involved in the attacks, which took place over three locations. Here, then, the conflation or reduction of these events and objects to a singular vehicle is representative of the way in which the attack has been reified and turned into a unitary event, one with its own origin story and effects. To invoke 9/11, these lines suggest, is to invoke the image of a singular plane crashing into a singular tower.

The critic Kara Keeling has addressed the intersection between gender, violence, and a forward-looking perspective as it appears in some queer political poetry. Writing of Marx's notion

of a “poetry from the future,” Keeling describes the “formal” and “temporal” way in which this kind of poetry disrupts language. It “functions,” she writes, “primarily at the level of affect” so as to “resist narration and qualitative description,” as well as to interrupt “the habitual formation of bodies.”<sup>44</sup> The description is appropriate for Vaid-Menon’s poetry too, which, as a poetry from the future—an ideal or utopian poetry where there is “no violence” and “no plane”—uses affective language to reconcile all manner of conflicts, including the “egodystonic” conflict between one’s identity and one’s assigned-at-birth body.

The list of writers who work both as poets and scholars is long; however, among them, only very few identify as trans. One such trans poet-scholar is Steph Burt, an author whose complex gender identity was, as I have already intimated above, shot into the public spotlight when Mark Oppenheimer’s *New York Times* article named them “Poetry’s Cross-Dressing Kingmaker.”<sup>45</sup> In response to the controversy surrounding the article, Burt responded with striking magnanimity:

The NYT piece—for which I remain very grateful to Mark Oppenheimer!—ended up being sort of performative: a newspaper of record had said that I sometimes showed up to public events as Stephanie, which meant that of course now I did, or at least I could. I wore dresses and skirts to parties and public events in the 1990s, so anyone who knew me then knew that about me, but I wasn’t able to talk about myself as trans in the 2000s in the way that I can do now.<sup>46</sup>

The change in culture that Burt describes—a change that enabled them to identify as trans more openly—speaks to the shifting position of trans people in society, as well as to the slow incorporation of specific terms into our common language, terms that may have once been articulated only in a coded, substitutive language. Burt first addressed their gender identity in poetic form in their third book, *Belmont*, which was published in 2013. “So Let Not Am I” might be described as Burt’s poetic “coming out,” and it is at once an exploration of what it means to straddle the gender divide

and a reflection on the impossibility of doing so in a culture that erases trans people's existence.<sup>47</sup> The poem begins with signifiers that denote Burt's "lost girlhood," naming the "subjunctive lost bangles and butterfly clips, plastic / sapphires, sparkly barrettes" (52) that they do not, and did not ever, possess. The term "subjunctive" here betrays the secret depths of the speaker's experience: they long for the ordinary markers of girlhood, and may perhaps even wish to experience the loss of those items, and yet they are unable to possess them, and so they are also destined to have "lost" them to begin with.

Furthermore, Burt frequently uses half rhyme, exacerbating the affective sense of inchoateness, incompleteness, and queerness that pervades the poem. At the centre of the poem, in the middle stanza, the following lines appear:

a coin: one side is rusty, incomplete  
a profile of some guy who united his states,  
and to that history I say "sweet,  
but I can see myself nowhere."  
And yet it is a feeling I prefer  
to the other side, the faceless and the  
valueless, the absolutely free. (53-54)

This speaks to the heart of Burt's identity quest. The poet uses the word "states" as a clever pun, referring at once to the "united" states of America, and the different gender "states" experienced by the trans subject. But this wordplay is also coupled with masculine identifiers—"some guy"—and this highlights Burt's own difficulty in "uniting" their states; after all, they can see themselves only "nowhere." Of course, as is typical of Burt's poetry, the line is also ironic, tongue in cheek, and may remind us that humour is one of the primary linguistic strategies or codes employed by oppressed groups as a distancing mediator.

This is in line with Henri Bergson's theory of laughter. Bergson conceives of laughter as essential for political change as, once one is removed from the immediacy of one's self, and instead moved through the alternative, less ego-driven space created by laughter, new meanings are formed.<sup>48</sup> In this context, the poet's

description of the “faceless and the / valueless” refers to those people who cross the divide between genders (represented earlier in the poem by the two sides of a coin), and their invisibility within wider society. And the poet expresses this concern with seeing and being seen elsewhere in the poem, in a line where, breaking the fourth wall, the speaker will address the reader directly: “This poem makes eyes at you, / eyes back at me” (54). Here the poem-as-object, and persona-as-speaker, are separated by the act of seeing and the more passive experience of being seen. Scopophobia, or the fear of being seen, is a common theme of poetry about gender identity. Tied to concerns about “passing”—the ability of an individual to hide their transgender status from others—the notion of scopophobia tends to be invoked in trans poetry as a disruptive force, such as it is here, where it literally ruptures the poem, breaking it in two.<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that in this poetic moment, where the reader is supplied with the image of the coin, we become one step further removed from the imagined world of the persona, the added layers of distance here providing a “cover” for the expression their desire. This creates a space for addressing unvoiced desires, such as the poet’s desire to align themselves with the “profile of some guy” despite “seeing [themselves] nowhere”; and yet, for fear of the response, as well as being seen, the poet must remain faceless. In expressing and experimenting with these variously repressed, sublimated, and reconfigured desires, Burt’s work addresses the need for a representational system with which trans and gender-nonconforming youth can align themselves and identify—a complex political agenda in and of itself. Additionally, Burt’s poetry’s engagement with the complex politics of passing illustrates the way that both lived and imagined trans experience may allow for the building of a community that is based on shared experience.

After a career of writing predominantly internet-based poetry, Joshua Jennifer Espinoza published her first poetry collection in 2014, titled *I’m Alive / It Hurts / I Love It*.<sup>50</sup> Afterwards, Espinoza joined with a team of five trans poets to embark on the *Trans Planet* tour, a poetry reading expedition that journeyed along the East Coast of the United States during the summer

of 2015. Espinoza's poem "The Moon is Trans" draws on archetypes of the trans experience, the transphobic attitudes that deny existence of trans people, as well as the codification of trans culture. Written in second person, the poem ensures the reader becomes an active participant in the narrative. "You don't get to write about the moon again unless you use her correct pronouns" (28), writes the poet, indirectly (if not ironically) referring to the failure of news publications and of those in society more generally to address the trans subject in a way that is appropriate. Notably, Espinoza uses the term "correct" rather than "preferred," at once identifying these acts of misnaming as errors of fact rather than of etiquette. Using the "moon" as a synecdoche for the trans subject, the poem emphasises the importance of identitarian politics and policy, making the point that facts, rather than social orthodoxies, are crucial to addressing issues related to the LGBTQIA+ community, and even more so for trans people. Then invoking the alleged facticity of science as an allegory for the trans experience, the poet associates modern scientific thinking with the Old Testament:

Scientists theorise the moon was once part of the earth  
that broke off when another planet struck it.  
Eve came from Adam's rib.  
Etc. (28)

Trans experiences have long been pathologised, their complexities relegated to the realm of science. In 2013, with the introduction of the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, the diagnostic category of "gender dysphoria" was replaced with "gender identity disorder," purportedly to destigmatise trans people but at the same time preserve a diagnosis acceptable to medical insurance companies.<sup>51</sup> Despite the good intentions of those promoting the semantic change, which was, as Zowie Davy writes, intended to "better indicate distress they experience when their gender identity feels incongruent," the continued classification of trans people as "disordered" has served only to reinforce their pathologisation.<sup>52</sup>

In the lines from which I quoted in the preceding paragraph, Espinoza draws on a Biblical verse from Genesis: “The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man.”<sup>53</sup> The quotation, of course, is laced with irony, as in the Biblical narrative the woman was literally created from, or at least through, a man. In the lines that follow, the poet succinctly adumbrates the confusion and tautology that pervades many of the discourses devoted to trans issues: “This is all upside down” (29). In addition, the speaker highlights the fear of retribution and the perpetual state of danger in which the trans community, but especially trans women, live: “She turns her face from you because of what you might do. / She will outlive everything you know” (29). In these lines, the words “What you might do” implies an act of violence, committed by the reader, the “you,” in the poem; however, the vulnerability of the “she”—that is, the trans woman who is the subject of the poem—is reversed in the last line, which stresses the resilience and endurance of the trans community, which will “outlive everything,” surviving all such attempts at intimidation or violence against it.

As I proposed at the beginning of the paper, a trans poetics must be one that speaks both to and of the trans experience so as to build a community that is capable of enacting change. No trans community, however, has been able to escape from the transphobia and violence that has beset it historically. As Trish Salah observes, even if a trans subject has not experienced violence directly, then they have witnessed it in other ways: “our violence is witnessing violence.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, some of the acts of violence committed against trans people are physical, and their effects are perceptible through brutal injuries and murders.<sup>55</sup> But others are less obvious or less material, and result in less clearly discernible reconfigurations in popular moods, general attitudes, and beliefs, and can lead to such changes as the encoding of languages, as I have posited above. Echoing the title of Audre Lorde’s essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” a group of lines near the end of Vaid-Menon’s “when a birth certificate” capture the difficulty of speaking explicitly about these acts of violence:

how we no longer attempt  
to translate violence into  
language

These lines capture one of the central objectives of trans poetry: the attempt to translate violence into language, hatred into poetry, senselessness into meaning. Trans poetics expresses frustration in response to the indifference and apathy expressed toward violence against and amidst trans people; when, for instance, deaths are not honoured by commemorations in speech and writing, trans poetry seeks to repair and to remedy these exclusions. Judith Butler has illuminated the way in which bodily violence generates a collective loss, a shared form of suffering:

Despite our differences in location and history . . . we have all lost in recent decades to AIDS, but there are other losses that afflict us, from illness and from global conflict; and there is the fact as well that women and minorities, including sexual minorities, are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realisation. This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed.<sup>56</sup>

Butler's assertion that the body is the *site du jour* for political and social violence is not new; however, when one considers the additional vulnerabilities associated with the bodies of trans and gender-nonconforming subjects, the point is newly forceful. Trans poetics attempts to achieve what Butler associates with the aims of obituaries and mourning rituals: to provide a record, and acknowledging the importance, of trans lives and experiences. As with the mourning ritual, trans poetry often records the fact that there "has been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualifies for recognition."<sup>57</sup> This is not just because trans poetry often serves to mourn the death of trans people, but because these poetries speak to the realities of trans

experience, drawing attention to trans lives and the issues the trans community faces.

Too little research has been devoted to trans poetry. Indeed, apart from Tolbert and Peterson's book, which contains many varied, excellent, and formative essays, there is next to no scholarly work that takes up trans poetry as its explicit and singular subject.<sup>58</sup> Of course, Keenaghan has written on queer poetics generally (as have many others); but then, even this category of work is scarce.<sup>59</sup> This paper has sought not only to ignite scholarly discourse on trans poetics but to begin a process of describing the genre's formal features. When it comes to a queer poetics, Keenaghan writes that the genre or form must serve as a resource for reimagining the world, one that might originate in LGBT subjects' specific experiences of oppression and marginalisation but that ultimately works toward inspiring new coalitions and universal inclusivity.<sup>60</sup>

On political poetry more generally still, Dowdy writes that it must always be "a reflection of and response to contemporary culture."<sup>61</sup> Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr assert that what is most important for contemporary poetry is that it functions as an "interlocutor in the large conversation about what we as human beings are becoming, what matters."<sup>62</sup> Given the seemingly overwhelming need for a poetry that speaks to and about the gaps in equality—and that expresses a range of experiences that challenges those structures that perpetuate violence and hatred—it seems only too clear that queer poetry should act as a powerful force in the trans community. Just as trans poetry must be political, then, so must a trans politics embrace the poetic; it must attend to, celebrate, and scrutinise this mode of expression, for not only is it oriented toward change and growth but reflective of trans experience.

## Notes

1. Eric Keenaghan, "Queer Poetry: Between 'As Is' and 'As If,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. Scott Herring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 51.

2. Ibid.
3. Nerys Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh: 2011), 92.
4. Ibid., 34.
5. Bruce Boone and Frank O'Hara, "Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 64.
6. Michael Dowdy, *American Political Poetry in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 123.
7. Trish Salah, "In Lieu of a Transgender Poetics," *Open Letter* 9 (2009): 36; Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 82.
8. Boone and O'Hara, "Gay Language as Political Praxis," 90.
9. Keenaghan, "Queer Poetry," 55.
10. Ian Brinton, *Contemporary Poetry: Poets and Poetry since 1990* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 2009), 41; Williams, *Contemporary Poetry*, 33.
11. See, for instance, Mary Bernstein's analysis of identity politics and the emergence of queer politics in the 1980s: Bernstein, "Identity Politics," *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 56.
12. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2.
13. Trace Peterson, "Becoming A Trans Poet: Samuel Ace, Max Wolf Valerio, and kari edwards" *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 531.
14. See TC Tolbert and Trace Peterson (eds.), *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (Portland: Nightboat Books, 2013); Mark Oppenheimer, "Poetry's Cross-Dressing Kingmaker," *New York Times*, September 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/magazine/stephen-burt-poetry-cross-dressing-kingmaker.html>
15. While I note that Burt uses both the she/her/hers as well as the he/him/his sets of pronouns, I will use they in this essay.
16. Salah, "In Lieu," 35.
17. Ibid., 36.
18. Trans women have long been associated with the abject, especially in cinema and television, where being revealed to be a trans woman typically invokes vomit and disgust. See, for instance, David E. Kelley, *Harry's Law* (2012); Todd Phillips (dir.), *The Hangover Part II* (2011); Neil Jordan (dir.), *The Crying Game* (1992); Brian De Palma (dir.), *Dressed to Kill* (1980); and Tom Shadyac (dir.), *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994).
19. Tolbert and Peterson (eds.), *Troubling the Line*, 10.
20. Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet," 524.
21. Freud coined the term "ego-syntonic" and introduced the concept of egosyntonia in his essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1910), repr. in James Strachey, ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), XIV: 99.

22. Dowdy, *American Political Poetry*, 23.
23. *Ibid.*, 127.
24. *Ibid.*
25. On “ipseity,” see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, tr. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2–3.
26. Peterson, “Becoming a Trans Poet,” 523–24.
27. Boone and O’Hara, “Gay Language as Political Praxis,” 64.
28. According to a report of the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, in 2016, 68 percent of hate violence-related homicides in the United States were against transgender and gender-nonconforming people: see NCAVP, *Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2016* (New York: Emily Waters, 2016), 9, [http://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NCAVP\\_2016HateViolence\\_REPORT.pdf](http://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NCAVP_2016HateViolence_REPORT.pdf); also see Rebecca L. Stotzer, “Violence Against Transgender People: A Review of the Data,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14, no. 3 (2009): 170–79.
29. Barack Obama, “President Obama’s State of the Union Address—Remarks As Prepared for Delivery,” *The White House*, January 15, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address/>.
30. Katy Steinmetz, “Why It’s a Big Deal that Obama said ‘Transgender,’” *Time*, January 22, 2015, <http://time.com/3676881/state-of-the-union-2015-barack-obama-transgender/>.
31. Alok Vaid-Menon, “girls wear blue; boys wear pinkwashing,” *Alok Vaid-Menon*, February 2, 2015, <https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2015/2/2/girls-wear-blue-boys-wear-pinkwashing/>.
32. See Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” in Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5, and Soshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, or, the Vicissitudes of Teaching” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 31.
33. Soshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, or, the Vicissitudes of Teaching” in Caruth, ed. *Trauma*, 31.
34. *OED Online*, s.v. “discarded,” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/53664?redirectedFrom=discarded#eid/>.
35. See National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP), *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2014* (New York: Emily Waters, 2015), 46, [http://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2014\\_HV\\_Report-Final.pdf/](http://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2014_HV_Report-Final.pdf/).
36. Katy Steinmetz, “The Transgender Tipping Point” *TIME Magazine*. <http://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>
37. See, for instance, Sean Kicummah Teuton’s study of the literature of “Red Power,” a period of Native American organizing beginning in the late 1960s: *Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

38. Brinton, *Contemporary Poetry*, 10.
39. Williams, *Contemporary Poetry*, 62.
40. Alok Vaid-Menon, "when a birth certificate hijacks a body and tells it to speak or forever hold its peace" *return the gayze: trans south asian poetry and politics*, available via *The Wayback Machine*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150406020400/http://returnthegayze.com/2015/02/05/girls-wear-blue-boys-wear-pinkwashing/>.
41. On intersex surgery, see Georgiann Davis and Erin L. Murphy, "Intersex Bodies as States of Exception: An Empirical Explanation for Unnecessary Surgical Modification," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 2 (2013): 129–52.
42. See Sunaina Marr Maira, *The 9/11 Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
43. While African American vernacular English is a term used in various contexts, this language is also routinely referred to as "Black English, African American English, or Ebonics": see, for instance, Joseph McLaren, "African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and the Dilemma of Identity," *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 1 (2009): 97–111.
44. Kara Keeling, "Looking for M-: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 567.
45. Mark Oppenheimer, "Poetry's Cross-Dressing Kingmaker" *The New York Times*.
46. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/magazine/stephen-burt-poetrys-cross-dressing-kingmaker.html?\\_r=0/](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/magazine/stephen-burt-poetrys-cross-dressing-kingmaker.html?_r=0/).
47. Stephen Burt, interviewed by Kaveh Akbar, "I'm happy to spend my time persuading you to read non-me poets," *Divedapper*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.divedapper.com/interview/stephen-burt/>.
48. Stephen Burt, *Belmont* (Minneapolis, MA: Greywolf Press, 2013), 52–55.
49. Henri Bergson, "Laughter ["Le Rire"]", 1900; repr. in David Krasner, ed., *Theatre in Theory, 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 52–54.
50. On "passing" and its relationship with spirituality, trans identity, and literature, see Rachel Mann, "'Queering' Spiritual Direction: Towards a Trans\*-Literary Praxis," *Theology & Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2014): 214–24.
51. Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, *I'm Alive / It Hurts / I Love It* (Tucson: Boost House, 2014), 28–29.
52. See Zowie Davy, "The DSM-5 and the Politics of Diagnosing Trans people," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44, no. 5 (2015): 1165–76; also see American Psychiatric Association, "Gender Dysphoria" in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatry Association, 2014); and cf. American Psychiatric Association, "Gender Identity Disorder" in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatry Association, 2000), 576.

53. Davy, "The DSM-5," 1165; also see World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), *Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People*, 7th version (2012): 23.
54. Gen. 2: 22.
55. Salah, "In Lieu," 36.
56. See, for instance, "Effects of Violence on Transgender People," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 43, no. 5 (2012): 452–59.
57. Judith Butler, *Precarious Lives* (London: Verso, 2004), 20.
58. *Ibid.*, 34.
59. Although see Rebekah Edwards, "Trans-poetics," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014): 252; Trish Salah, "Notes towards Thinking Transsexual Institutional Poetics," in Eva C. Karpinski, Jennifer Henderson, Ian Sowton, and Ray Ellenwood, eds. *Trans/acting Culture, Writing, and Memory: Essays in Honour of Barbara Godard* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 167–192; Joy Ladin, "Trans Poetics Manifesto," in Tolbert and Peterson, *Troubling the Line*, 299–307; Petra Kuppers, "Trans-ing Disability Poetry at the Confluence," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 605–613; Joy Ladin, "'Spit it Open and Count the Seeds': Trans Identity, Trans Poetics, and Oliver Bendorf's *The Spectral Wilderness*" (Book Review), *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, nos. 3–4 (2016): 637–648; and Susan Stryker, "Dungeon Intimacies: The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism," *Parallax* 14, no. 1 (2008): 36–47.
60. But see, for example, Jose Escabi, "Unfathomable Poetics: Queer Interpersonality in the New York School," *Atenea* 33 nos. 1–2 (2013): 91–100; and Karen Lambert, "'Capturing' Queer Lives and the Poetics of Social Change," *Continuum* 30, no. 5 (2016): 576–586.
61. Keenaghan, "Queer Poetry," 56.
62. Dowdy, *American Political Poetry*, 198.
63. Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr, eds., *Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7.