

# Trans Media Moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013

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## Abstract

For transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming people, emergent media technologies offer new outlets for self-representation, outlets that often last for only a brief moment. This article examines trans culture on the website Tumblr during the period from March 2011, when the authors began researching the platform, to May 2013, when Yahoo! paid creator David Karp over a billion dollars for the site. Through auto-ethnographic dialogue about the loose social networks within Tumblr to which the authors contributed during this phase, the article explores ephemeral aspects of self-representation at the intersection of postmodern art practice, sexual politics, and queer subjectivities. From at least 2011 to 2013, people collectively oriented in opposition to dominant discourses of gender and sexuality used Tumblr to refashion straight cisgender norms and to create everyday art in a hybrid media space.

## Keywords

transgender, Tumblr, new media, sexuality, queer, blog

## Introduction

Quinlan Miller (QM): Since debuting in 2007, the website Tumblr has fostered cultural exchange among people who identify as queer and transgender. The image-oriented pages of transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming people have created intricate networks of digital self-representation. These networks connect Tumblr users who collectively oppose traditional systems of gender distinction and who are also queer in terms of their sexual practices and conceptions of sexuality. Through the site, these users, like others, circulate everything from fashion,

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pornography, and life updates to theory, protest, and event publicity. Tumblr began acknowledging its integrated advertising last year. Then the company changed hands in May 2013, when Yahoo! paid 1.65 billion dollars for the site. As we discuss our research into and active participation in tumblr enclaves, I suggest that, as a way of channeling tensions between queer trans people and corporate interests, we use “Tumblr,” with a capital “T,” to refer to the company and the lowercase “tumblr” to mark resistant networks on the site, as well as specific users’ tumblrs (i.e., their tumblr pages). The format encourages customization at many levels. Templates recur, but one tumblr generally looks much different from the next. Even more so than platforms like WordPress or Blogger, Tumblr allows users to cultivate a personal style at the level of design, which many users orient toward an aesthetic of formal experimentation, irony, historiography, or technophilia.

Marty Fink (MF): To start, we should describe the form and mechanisms of Tumblr for people unfamiliar with the site.

QM: Right. Tumblrs typically consist of a long chain of uncontextualized short entries, which may include images, recordings, links, and text in various combinations. For example, an entry consisting of a link to a song embeds an image of an album cover or other associated art. Posts aggregate visually, creating a portrait of each user that resembles the experience of web browsing—which is, in self-reflexive fashion, what generates content. Some users include explanatory descriptions with posts, while others do not. Some repost (“reblog”) information included at the source of an entry, while others leave it up to the reader to track back to the original for citational information and an indication of the content and its authenticity or fabrication. Posts generally include a link, via the users’ handles, to the original tumblr on which they appeared, along with the tumblr from which the user reblogged the entry. This platform creates a record of every image’s circulation through “notes,” which list each user who has posted an item to their tumblr. A post’s notes reflect the order in which users reblogged the entry and include any commentary they added. I commonly use notes to check if I have accurately identified classic Hollywood era actors. On some occasions, I’ve supplied information or corrected misinformation about my favorite performers. Others use notes to engage in activist and intellectual conversation.

MF: It is these specific elements of the Tumblr interface that have allowed the site to host the “disidentificatory” (Muñoz 1999) work of queer users wrestling trans sexualities out of a white, middle-class, cisgender (non-trans), mass-consumption paradigm and toward an individually tailored, polyvocal, margin-based, and personalized form of distribution.

QM: Yes. The genderqueer and queer trans expression this environment has fostered crystallizes a lot of recent innovations in offline queer culture. I’ve been especially interested in examining the ways in which tumblrs focused on art, fashion, and activist culture feature objects of desire and/or identification. Many people, especially fat trans femme snarksters of color, are at the forefront of a field of inquiry Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman (2010) discuss as “looks studies,” one focused on interrupting and restructuring dominant modes of perception.

MF: My own use of Tumblr has helped to connect me to radical pockets of queer and trans heroes sharing their daily struggles, experiences, and art. My time on

Tumblr—which I mostly spend reblogging queer/trans art, archival documents, and artifacts inspired by poodles, as well as my own web-based art—has majorly influenced my thinking about disabled queer/trans bodies, about fatness and fat queer/trans fashion, as well as the scope and breadth of possibility for queer/transsexual representation and pornography. Like any popular and accessible Internet medium, I do find it unstartling that Tumblr has been sold. Even before the sale, I have wondered about what content (for instance, the extreme jubilation and testimonials for certain brands of sex toys) is secretly just advertising and content motivated by corporate sponsorship. This sneaky fake user-generated content proliferates on other corporate owned sites like Facebook, and issues of where content comes from and in whose interests content grows now comes further to the fore. As with issues of privacy and image permanence on Facebook, the idyllic Tumblr of yore is going to be increasingly encroached on by corporate attention. One hopes, however, that Tumblr's increasing popularity will preserve its status as a continued outlet for original artwork and an additional channel of expression for events that transpire offline, or IRL (“In Real Life”).

QM: At the time of the Yahoo! acquisition, I was fully engrossed in my own queer trans tumblr microcosm, which I cultivated by surfing the fringe elements of cinephiles, TV archivists, poststructuralists, and camp producers. For the past year, I had been actively reblogging film, telefilm, and queer trans art to my tumblr at an average of 100 posts per week.

MF: Our own ways of using Tumblr indicate the wide range of different forms queer trans content takes on the site. Certainly, there is an even broader range of forms and content beyond this one site. Yet the use of Tumblr has been especially revealing of collective online queer trans creativity, particularly around sexual expression, everyday coalitional politics, and genderqueer culture. I came to the site to connect to a community of queer introverts in my daily “real” life who spend much of their time building digital cultures online. I wanted to be part of these communities as well as the (often far less accessible) ones we were building offline. At present, Tumblr plays a unique role as a particular digital forum for disseminating self-representations of trans experience beyond local contexts and spatial boundaries.

QM: I created a tumblr account to follow (i.e., subscribe to) other people's tumblrs not anticipating I would post anything myself. The entries of each person you follow appear on your dash (the dashboard or “home” page), in a composite of current activity. An archival impulse has motivated my increasing participation in the site, as I reblog images for the record. These include images from my dashboard and also many I discover by intuitively tracing interesting activity through the thread of posts' notes. Reblogging involves one or two strokes. Soon after creating an account, I was adding original content in the form of scans, screen captures, links, audio, and photos.

MF: Outsiders typically understand Tumblr through the discourse of the blog, as a “microblog” platform. Whereas blogging implies prose, microblogging, or “tumblelogging” (aka “Tumblogging” on Tumblr), mostly involves marking and annotating, or simply reposting, content encountered on other sites. Showing some similarities but also striking differences from interfaces like Pinterest and Reddit, Tumblr sparks image-centered conversations about topics including art, fashion, race, disability, popular

culture, and the obligatory cats. Radical and sex-positive queer and trans culture proliferates on Tumblr.

QM: That proliferation makes Tumblr an interesting venue for addressing cultural politics and questions of intersectionality together with topics in new media theory, like intertextuality and medium specificity. Tumblr can be more erratic than other sites in that certain subcultural practices foster unfamiliar modes of temporal engagement.

MF: Right. For example, people use Tumblr's specific temporal possibilities to register style and sexuality in relation to lived experiences of gender, race, class, diaspora, and ability with which they critically and creatively engage.

QM: Exactly. The recent merger has really shown the limitations of using the "blog" concept to understand Tumblr. As media critic Howard Rheingold points out, "Tumblr differs from first-wave blogging . . . by enabling people to express themselves by reblogging material they see elsewhere in a kind of collage of found social objects that reflect their vision or taste" (2012, 140). Yet, as part of the acquisition coverage, journalists suggested sites like WordPress and Twitter as alternatives to Tumblr, oblivious to the medium-specific structures of feeling that have made Tumblr appealing to queer trans dissidents. In an emblematic misconstrual of Tumblr, Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer described the Tumblr dashboard as "the inbox for the blogs you follow" (Lunden 2013). While this is in some ways a useful analogy, it overlooks Tumblr's own messaging systems. The reference to email domesticates many significant features that infuse instability and idiosyncrasy into the platform. In practice, Tumblr's aesthetics reference a mode of engagement distinct to the site—a mode that may be contingent on the combination of its relative accessibility, in terms of interface and network transparency, and its simultaneous obscurity, in terms of the intensive specialization of the subcultures and insular fandoms the site supported prior to its FaceBook-ification.

*Cultural production in the pre-Yahoo! buyout period raises important questions about how innovative modes of social networking spark new media practices resistant to the corporate monetization of cultural production driving the development and dissemination of web 2.0 technology.*

## Trans Cultural Production

MF: Given the silences and fetishistic misrepresentations in public culture around trans existence, the Internet facilitates information exchange and self-exploration for many trans people. Vastly different types of trans people with vastly different self-understandings and sexual identities create a broad range of communities online. Tumblr has been a prolific outlet for queer trans people, in particular. On any given day, one might, whether according to whim or design, post a series of photos found elsewhere, images from one's own digital camera; a popular meme; and some brief comments or hashtags annotating the popularity or significance of the posted content.

QM: Yes. Tumblr is a system of simultaneous consumption and production within which pleasures of juxtaposition, repetition, and recurrence are frequent and fast-paced. Its temporal and spatial dimensions are fascinating. Depending on the time of

day, day of the week, and a host of other variables, including how many pages you follow—I'm currently at 475—there may be several new posts or there may be hundreds every time you refresh your dash. Every moment is a provocative illustration of the Benjaminian concept of “now-time,” or the revolutionary possibility in the present. Through posts and commentary, I can sometimes see which people, of those I follow, follow each other. I often explore new networks by viewing the pages of people who reblog or like something I post and cruising their seemingly most tangential connections. These elements make tumblr's taste-based subcultures different from the profiles on a site like FaceBook in that, to thrive within Tumblr's format, you need to labor and gain credibility according to particularly intense systems of distinction. Within this system, genderqueer and queer trans tumblr users can displace the pernicious norms conditioning representations of trans people within the constraints of mainstream spaces (online and off). Spaces of antinormative trans self-representation within the Tumblr network compel a nuancing of current scholarly understandings of trans and genderqueer sexualities, identities, and representations.

MF: To appreciate the impact of queer trans tumblr production, it is important to consider the acute need for new media spaces for trans cultural production, given the long history of obstacles to self-representation that transgender, gender nonconforming, and gender variant people have faced. Trans identities have been recurrently co-opted, oversimplified, fetishized, and erased by mainstream media outlets and cultural productions.

QM: Without a doubt, even with the increase in exposure over the past decades, mainstream media productions focus on middle-class, professional trans people, compelling them to provide personal stories of anatomy and physical transformation. The biographical focus on gender norms within the transition narrative—rather than on pressing issues of access to documentation, education, housing, employment, and health care—forecloses an analysis of the social and economic factors that shape trans lives (Namaste 2005, 49).

*Journalists are paying increasing attention to transsexual and transgender people, but as Viviane Namaste's writings show, their reports rarely allow us to speak in our own terms about our own lives (2005, 47). Namaste's work explains how news media frame trans experience as something for the interest and entertainment of cis viewers, while failing to address the legal and financial barriers that trans people face. Julia Serano's analysis of mainstream media representations of trans people identifies a reductive focus on the physical aspects of transition, in particular (2007, 54). Serano argues that the cultural obsession with anatomy and appearance results in prevalent tropes of transition (from an endless barrage of before-and-after pictures to overwrought sequences of “putting on” one's gender), particularly for women, that ultimately produce a class-based differentiation between trans and cis people, overemphasizing gender difference and undervaluing the role of sexism and misogyny in shaping trans experience (2007, 57).*

*In illuminating connections between gender binaries and the maintenance of patriarchy, Serano's work demonstrates how we can combat gender-based violence on a wider scale by challenging myopic images of trans-ness and transition. Dominant discourses of sexuality and gender limit how trans people and our sexual practices are*

*defined and understood. The dominant representational system reduces trans sexuality (i.e. the sexuality of trans people) to gender performance or to fetishized images of trans bodies. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) established, sexuality and sexual practice are “known” through gender. In contexts overdetermined by a hetero/homosexual opposition, a person’s gender and the gender of their partners is seen to determine their sexual identity. As Sedgwick’s work reveals, this system of organizing sexuality follows from severe discursive constraints on what signifies as “sexuality” and what “sexuality” can entail. The epistemological framework that grants credence to homo/hetero distinctions overshadows an abundance of objects, subject positions, and practices—all relatively independent of gender—around which we might organize erotic life.*

QM: Clusters of cultural production across individual tumblrs showcase this abundance of sexual objects, one reason it remains unclear whether Tumblr’s queer trans constituency will survive Yahoo! ownership. These networks are particularly vulnerable to and potentially jeopardized by the advertising-marketing-demographics interests signaled by the sale. In Tumblr’s early period, at least, queer trans tumblr production has often foreshadowed scholarship in academic trans studies.

MF: True. Without much institutional support, trans studies of sexuality have sought to make distinctions of sexual practice beyond homo/hetero knowable and representable. For instance, Patrick Califia’s ([1994] 2001) classic essay on anal fisting in BDSM argues for hand/wrist size and not gender or genitals as the object of cruising and sexual attention. Jack Halberstam’s analysis of subcultural media similarly repositions sexuality not as an outcome of gender identity but rather in relation to other factors like building friendships, resisting gender-based violence, surviving mental illness, and battling poverty (2005, 95). As Serano and Namaste caution, crucial daily aspects of trans lives that are seemingly unrelated to gender or sexuality must be self-represented to encompass the ways in which transness intersects with a host of other factors that inform sexual desire where and when it does arise.

QM: This is why the merger, however unsurprising, is so unsettling to me. Mayer and Tumblr founder David Karp have stated commitments to protect Tumblr and not “screw it up” (Mayer 2013). In particular, the owners claim they will limit the incursion of advertising on the site to avoid censoring pornography and other content that might turn off mass audiences and thus big ticket investments in ad space. Yet the very fact of Yahoo! control changes the information and everyday art production that appears on Tumblr. The site’s aesthetics and the possible meanings of its content are shaped by discursive and economic contexts.

MF: Up to this point, Tumblr has circulated important aspects of queer trans imaginaries through a catalog of images reminiscent of earlier eras but suited to the constantly shifting new media landscape. In the digital realm, vectors of racial, disabled, activist, artistic, and transnational identity complicate conventional expectations of trans identity and experience. Tumblr has facilitated the online emergence of a “callout culture” where people of color can draw awareness to and effectively critique daily practices of racism and cultural appropriation that often go unchecked.

*Tumblr's systems of trans self-representation thereby call into question both the freedoms and the limitations of digital production as an emerging cultural force. Issues of distribution indicate the importance of remaining aware of how the Internet tends to reinforce cultural norms of whiteness. Even within digital spaces aiming—or at least claiming—to represent diversity and the work of artists of color, structural racism prevails.*

MF: Elisha Lim comes to mind. Since 2010, Lim has used their tumblr as an installation space for their illustrated interviews with trans, butch, sissy, and other queerly identified people of color. These portraits link genderqueer self-presentation with queer modes of sexual expression through discussions of flirtation, dandyism, racialization, diaspora, and fashion.

Lim's (2010) *100 Butches* circulates digitally and in print, countering white and heterodominant norms influencing media representations of gender presentation, sexual practice, and queer erotics. In one comic from this series, the speaker asks, "Do people read me as masculine? Do they see my Chinese race first? And what does that do to their perception of masculinity?" The illustrations accompanying such commentary draw on a mix of transnational references. Through candidly relating the experience of the subjects who sit for portraits, Lim creates a queer diasporic space for the self-fashioning and self-representation of gender nonconforming and racialized bodies. Rendered with delicate but stark ink lines and bright demonstrative colors that complement the earnestness of the text, the speaker reflects, "I've decided to create my own show. I dress for myself and I imitate my own East Asian role models like Andy Lau and Bi . . . [with] fur coats, sunglasses indoors, and bleached tips."

Online, Lim's representations circulate within media outlets that replicate the dominant privileging of whiteness within media production. We can trace this process by looking at Lim's tumblr from their 2011 calendar comic *The Illustrated Gentleman*. This piece features queer and trans people of color in equestrian menswear, yet the most circulated image was the one month out of twelve whose subject was white. *The Illustrated Gentleman* offers an anecdotal exploration of how style and clothing can express the intricacies of gender, sexual, and racial identification. In this context, the disproportionate reblogging of the one white model recuperates Lim's artistic world, in which queer people of color outnumber white queers by 11:1.

QM: I saw something similar play out with a post on "Experiments in Legitimacy." When Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) came out, I reblogged a number of images from relevant unacknowledged intertexts—of Julius Carry's Lord Bowler, for example, a black bounty hunter character in the mid-1990s scifi buddy western TV series *The Adventures of Brisco County Jr.* (FOX, 1993-1994). I was particularly interested in presenting Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, an experimental feature from 1971, as uncited source material. Of the three *Sweetback* stills I made, one person reblogged the image of the film's epigraph and one other person reblogged an intertitle proclaiming the protagonist's aim to "collect some dues" from the racist structures of U.S. power. Far more users—sixty-five and

counting—have circulated the text that prefaces the “dues” shot, which reads simply, “watch out.”

While the reblogging of the least politicized *Sweetback* image seems to have slowed to a steady pace, a spike in its recirculation came after someone erased Van Peebles’s name and the name of his film, radically decontextualizing the image. In the time since I made that post, Tumblr has introduced photosets, a feature that allows you to present multiple images as a single post. This feature might have prevented the “watch out” slide from circulating independently of the “dues” placard that follows it in the film, but there is no way to intervene. I can delete the image from my tumblr, but it won’t be extracted from the tumblrs of other users, and people may continue to reblog it from the other pages on which it appears.

In the case of these *Sweetback* posts, as with Lim’s *Illustrated Gentleman*, the notes feature presents a record of cultural appropriation and white-centrism even as the actual process of reblogging and liking posts reinscribes cycles of misrepresentation. Given the regeneration of social hierarchies through market logics, Yahoo!’s acquisition of Tumblr will likely only exacerbate the inequities that generate such nuances at the level of representation.

MF: It is useful here to turn to Alexandra Juhasz’s (2010) critique of the corporate and mainstream structure of online spaces in “YouTube at Five.” Juhasz, who is interested in the use of Internet video for activism, notes that users produce YouTube videos at a rate of twenty-four hours per minute. As far as those videos that might contribute to wide-scale resistance to dominant ideology go, “It is just as hard to find them (again) as it’s always been.”

QM: Juhasz presents the lack of archiving, standardization, and general orderliness of information in online social networks as evidence that sites like YouTube are less democratic than they purport to be. However, it is often this state of disarray in digital media that allows for a sense of freedom beyond traditional representational politics.

MF: According to Juhasz, the higher production values of YouTube’s “official” videos allocate real ownership over cultural production to better-funded projects (usually advertisements), while rendering low budget and homemade videos marginal or inferior. Independent and radical queer trans media makers like Rae Spoon and Lim are therefore juxtaposed in digital venues against the shiny, easier to find corporate images of mainstream media. While cultural makers like Spoon and Lim use musical covers and queer art to speak back to and engage critically with these media, their position is still always rendered against dominant images that proliferate online. As the circulation of Lim’s work demonstrates, though it may seem like the digital world offers a larger range of representation than cable or Hollywood, the entrenched hierarchies of “old” media continue to characterize online space.

QM: As skeptical as I am of a Yahoo! owned and operated Tumblr, I question Juhasz’s read of the YouTube situation. Juhasz implies that YouTube content coincides with corporate media productions. However, representations of the kind Raymond Williams describes as oppositional and unincorporated also proliferate. On Tumblr, the disparity between dominant ideology and resistant discursive production is amplified by the fast pace of intensely referential practices. The combination of impermanence,

anonymity, visual imagery, cultivated ambiguity, and the idiosyncrasies of specific spaces of interaction allows venues of self-celebration by queers critical of what Rubin (1992) has called the consecration of a “charmed circle” of sexuality. If you do find your subcultural niche within a network like Tumblr, it is a very sweet spot.

MF: Trans cultural makers’ use of Tumblr complements that of earlier media forms. At the same time, there are significant differences between contemporary online social networks and the systems of media circulation in earlier eras.

QM: The online work of queer trans producers often showcases the overlaps of different platforms. Since 2008, for example, “Not Another Aiden” has used many different sites for self-representation and anonymous queer trans visibility. The moniker “Not Aiden” and its author’s blog subtitle, “Life of A Non-Standard Gay (trans) Guy,” reference white hetero norms among trans men. Not Aiden, a Jewish Latino effeminate fanboy top and a “gay guy who happens to be trans,” disabuses readers who may have assumed he was white of their error in the entry “Why I don’t post about being a man of color.” Addressing effeminate gay trans men like himself, he writes, “I remember what it was like for me when I thought you could only be trans if you were straight.” Not Aiden started a tumblr, as he recalls, sometime around the first season of *Glee*. He now has three tumblrs: notaidenarchive presents a static record of his initial foray on the site, while his personal tumblr offers the “ramblings of a compact, overly analytical, often cranky fan geek.” Notaiden, which dates back to early 2012 and continues the work of his original blog, providing outreach to trans men and boys who are neither straight nor butch, has replaced the discussion forum he used to host with the open source software phpBB and rendered the posts of his WordPress blog less frequent and more introspective. Tumblr’s “ask” mechanism allows him to correspond quickly about trans topics while reblogging Harry Potter and porn posts on his primary tumblr. That tumblr, like his trans related tumblrs, counters the misperception that all trans people are either genderqueer or straight and gender conforming, effectively centering and unsensationalizing this public intellectual’s camp orientation and flaming gender expression—characteristics that, in dominant mainstream and trans contexts, would be seen as anomalous if recognized at all.

MF: This type of self-representation in digital venues powerfully recalls a rich history of trans cultural production in print. Tumblr, in particular, inspires me to return to radical trans cultural production predating the Internet. Historical connections that might link Tumblr to earlier moments of DIY zine production and fan culture are also especially compelling.

*Queer trans people have a strong tradition of using peripheral forms of cultural production to break isolation and establish community. Analyzing objects preserved at the Kinsey Institute, Joanne Meyerowitz shows how, in the post-World War II era, trans people scrapbooked and collaged images of Christine Jorgenson, the blonde bombshell poster woman for American access to gender affirming surgeries (1998, 175). The collective potential for recirculation of Jorgenson’s image was in many ways confined by the tropes of racial, national, and gender identity that critics and journalists deployed. Nevertheless, as trans people reimagined Jorgenson’s image*

through their own cut-and-paste archives, she came to represent new possibilities for trans representation, as well as for previously unrepresented embodiments and desires.

As Meyerowitz suggests, popular media and trans people's responses to it allow us to retrieve trans history from the lexicon of the medical industry through a re-circulation of dominant media production by trans people themselves (1998, 177). Cultural production is especially important because it brings representations of transness out of the single-issue focus of medical realm where it often appears and into intersectional dialogue with daily experiences of access to factors like employment, housing, community supports, and education.

MF: Other blueprints for today's trans tumblrs are evident in A. J. Withers's (2012) "If I Can't Dance, Is it Still My Revolution" and Micah Bazant's (1999) *Timtum: A Trans Jew Zine*. Like the Jorgenson scrapbooks, *Timtum* uses cut-and-paste collaging, in this case to represent Claude Cahun, a photographer and performance artist in 1930's Germany, as a trans ancestor and object of desire. Through a decoupling of image and text, typewritten and handwritten fonts, and a code mixing of English, Hebrew, and French, Bazant declares his "*crush sur Claude*," whom he historicizes as a "Jewish genderfreak artfag anti-Nazi resistance fighter."

QM: Cahun is one of many historical figures that critics thoughtlessly characterize according to cis norms. Through an emphasis on first given names and familiar sexual identity categories, this normative framing overwrites more complex trans sensibilities and queer dynamics. Artists like Cahun should inspire new ways of representing the possibility of trans experience in past eras. So far, we see this work happening in marginalized queer trans and genderqueer cultural production—especially on Tumblr—but not in the academy.

MF: *Timtum* addresses this very tension between a history of trans aesthetics and the cisnormative process of scholarly canonization. Bazant's work is indicative of a broader range of new media in that, through a rendering of scars, ambiguities, and other bodily signifiers of radical gender identity, it celebrates a Yiddish feygeleh history from which the contemporary trans body can evolve by rooting itself in Jewish cultural diaspora and in dialogue with the past. This work contests the official historicization of cultural figures with a participatory and transient DIY aesthetic. Onto a historical publication of Cahun's legacy, Bazant visually inscribes the textual ambiguities that signify radical gender identity through the body. The text annotates official accounts of Cahun, manually changing all of Cahun's pronouns to render him a trans hero and predecessor to Bazant's own identity. Rather than rewriting history, *Timtum* reabsorbs it, framing trans sexuality as a site that seeks pleasure from embodied uncertainties and marks of transition.

QM: Queer trans tumblrs capitalizing on Tumblr's capabilities initiate and proliferate this process of reabsorption.

MF: That brings me back to A. J. Withers's "If I Can't Dance, Is it Still My Revolution," a notable zine that speaks back to dominant cultural practices in ways that we can now read as an important precursor to trans production on Tumblr. Withers's zine frames trans desire along lines of access. Trans bodies are bodies in

protest—at being barred by the restrictions of physically inaccessible spaces as well as by the inaccessibility of the nation-state and its economic, educational, militarized, bordered, and administrative zones. With gender signified through one’s location in medical arenas, and sexuality expressed through the cruising of hospital spaces such as the prostate cancer ward, Withers’s writing represents trans desire beyond conventional narratives of hetero, monogamous, and able-bodied trans people.

*Through the intermixing of personal anecdotes and political call outs, tumblrs explore trans sexuality in the context of discrimination, health care, housing access, migration struggles, and street protests, moving out of an assimilationist paradigm and into a multi-issue, antinationalist, and queer framework. Rather than locating the trans body as a site exclusively of medicalization, tumblrs present access to medical services as interconnected to broader types of access from citizenship to the need to increase welfare rates and minimum wage. Linking Tumblr use, zines spotlight collaborative trans production of a wide range of queer political practices and sexual expressions. Historical research into different phases of self-representation shows how shifts in social norms are bound up with new media as one of many shifts in conditions of cultural production.*

## Media, Gender, and Sexuality Theory

MF: As a venue for self-representation, Tumblr points to the potential as well as to the limitations of digital cultures in moving sexuality out of the fetishized realm of the obscene and into more productive conversations of how desire functions alongside daily experiences of factors like racism, disability, and gender-based violence that converge to influence offline lives.

QM: Queer trans tumblrs have facilitated collective departures from cis and trans norms in ways that illuminate the range of possibilities online. People’s use of Tumblr has emphasized some of the ways in which many trans people contribute to queer culture through cultural practices related to sexuality—and to sexuality by way of gender—rather than simply in direct relation to gender. Through the juxtaposition of aesthetics and social critique, tumblr archives evoke the complexity of queer, trans, and genderqueer cultural history. In the context of specific Tumblr users, images of people making art, charting transitions, having sex, hanging out—or doing anything, really—communicate specific users’ interests, states of mind, erotic sensibilities, and political commitments. In the intertextual spaces carved out by the links between tumblrs, genderqueer and queer trans self-representations integrate seamlessly with lesbian, gay, bi, pan, poly, and asexual culture. As subsets of trans people develop queer gender and genderqueer identities within gay, lesbian, and bisexual lexicons, new media representations undermine cis norms in accordance with—and sometimes beyond—offline social practices.

*Sets of images organized through individual curatorial work and through collective reblogging draw attention to complex realms of identity, experience, and power relations, including those addressing: the relational production of queer gender, the role of sex in non- and anti-binary gender expression, and the multiplicity of meanings attached to what the dominant culture views as “secondary sex characteristics.”*

QM: Genderqueer tumblrs commonly create a context within which people can interpret photographs—whether celebrities and models or “selfies” (self-portraits)—in a space apart from binary gender constructions. These contexts, alternately disparate and interwoven, complicate assumed distinctions between trans and non-trans people. On the whole, these tumblrs further real-time practices of self-determination in which people gender body parts and sexual behavior based on self-understandings rather than essentialist or preconceived understandings of how bodies signify.

MF: Through tumblrs, people are expressing their sexual desires *as trans* or as organized around seemingly nonsexual facets of identity including race (“fuckyeahftmscolor”), black culture (“allaboutstuds”), ability (“cripqueer”), or fashion (“deep-lezstonerwitch”) (Tumblr). “Baking Butches,” for instance, offers a welcome for butches of all genders and identifications to post. The site welcomes users with the tagline: “Butch, Dyke, Trans, Genderqueer, Inbetween, Boi, Sissyboi, Tomboy, Wotever . . . it does not matter about your identity, we still want your pictures. Baking Butches is inclusive of EVERYTHING.” A similar trend has emerged on Tumblr’s trans porn and “xxx” blogs. The content of many of these tumblrs transgresses the limitations within rigidly gendered categories of “female” and “male.” In addition to providing a forum for the juxtaposition of bodies often reductively fetishized or desexualized by mainstream prescriptions of sexual beauty, these tumblrs also counter biological essentialism by rescripting the possibilities assigned to gendered bodied parts within cis frameworks. Posts featuring self-shot porn are routinely accompanied by commentary that creates new discursive terrain for trans subjectivity, through kinky and gender queer reconfigurations of dominant discourses. Naked portraits posted by a “lesbian identified, homoromantic gray asexual, fat (fuck the haters!), nerdy transchick,” for example, appear with the comments: “I love all of you here on tumblr, it has been your support and encouragement that has helped me truly accept my body as beautiful and have the pride enough to share it with the world!” The mixing of cisgendered and trans bodies within tumblrs that run off of submissions from users such as this rejects ideological distinctions between cis and gender nonconforming embodiment, as bodies formerly marked as gender normative signify, in these contexts, as trans and/or queer.

QM: Tumblr’s dashboard feature can contribute to this rejection, further enhancing the variety of bodies displayed onscreen—together, adjacent, and in juxtaposition.

MF: Yes, while some blogs cater specifically to images categorized by only one gender grouping or sexual bent, Tumblr’s specific homepage function congregates images from multiple sites into one stream of images reflecting each individual user’s interests, tastes, and history on the site. This format blends together sexual images that otherwise lack commonalities because they range from modest to hardcore, school-girls to bears, professional to cameraphone, vampire to vanilla, sentimental to humorous, long shots to close ups, male to female, and beyond. Such a format also resists categorizing postings by only one rubric, such as gender or transgender per se.

QM: Postings become even further removed from classificatory strongholds once they are shuffled and collaged together by reblogs and by creative interlocutors who merge materials from multiple and sometimes initially disconnected sources.

MF: Within these spaces, gendered body parts are transformed to assume new meanings; breasts can become an extension of masculinity and cocks can become feminine accessories or toys. Tumblr, furthermore, refuses to distinguish between pornographic (18+) and “regular” websites, instead using the classification NSFW (Not Safe For Work) to mark those blogs that may alternate indiscriminately between posts of cupcakes, fashion, kittens, and cocks of the flesh, synthetic, and illustrated varieties. One pornstar and poster on [transqueersxxx.tumblr.com](https://transqueersxxx.tumblr.com) writes, under a professional photograph of his muscular and tattooed shirtless body, “For the life of me, I don’t know how we’re led to believe that breasts don’t look good on men.” Another anonymous amateur poster likewise reflects, “I used to hate my cock, but I’m gradually learning to have fun with it. I don’t think it will ever feel ‘right’ to have one. But it’s a fun toy I can play with in the meantime!”

QM: That reminds me of an image that was liked and reblogged over a hundred times in under a month of circulation—a hand-drawn sketch of a person sporting a polka dotted bra and an erection. Accompanying the image is hand-drawn text that reads: “I don’t care if you’re FTM [“female-to-male”] or MTF [“male-to-female”], just as long as you’re DTF” [“down to fuck”]. In coupling MTF and FTM with DTF, the image interweaves digital idioms of sexual expression with genderqueer and trans lingo that, whether invoked as contemporary classification or vintage slang, emphasizes self-representation. The image’s bra-and-no-panties device renders MTF and FTM in a space of overlap, expanding cultural meanings of IRL trans subjectivities by way of digital image circulation.

MF: The FTM-MTF-DTF post is indicative of the way queer trans and genderqueer tumblrs transgress the boundaries between the mundane and obscene, between gender normativity and gender variance, and between male and female loci of desire. Trans tumblr communities, unlike many radical queer and transsexual spaces IRL, call into question definitions of sexuality that rely on categories of assigned or essentialized sex. In conceptualizing sexual content not as globally inappropriate but as situationally NSFW, the conversations that can happen between sexualized and quotidian images online take new forms. Thanks to the NSFW conceptualization, erotic images can be juxtaposed and put into conversation with the other seemingly desexualized aspects of daily existence that shape and inform sexual identity, desire, and its affirming expression across contexts and forms.

*In refusing binary logic that equates body parts with certain genders, queer trans tumblrs organize sexuality around a variety of desires that extend beyond gender identity alone or by confining meanings of transgender as represented in the mainstream. While some tumblrs are dedicated specifically to trans porn, most alternate between sexual images of trans and cis bodies; scrolling down the page one would likely encounter a range of body parts, gender presentations, and genitalia, hormonally/surgically altered and not. These venues, however, are not without the limits of new media of which Juhasz warns, as sites like “transqueersxxx” have been critiqued by readers for the overrepresentation of whiteness and the failure to connect with racialized communities online. New media open up exciting venues for self-representation, yet these venues continue to reflect representational barriers typical of older and offline platforms.*

## Conclusion

QM: Within a historical perspective that includes radical media predating and pre-meditating the Internet, attention to Tumblr illuminates a broad range of queer practices and everyday cultural production by trans people.

MF: Sexuality and sexual experience are central to contemporary iterations of the queer media traditions in which trans people participate. Across this range of sexual formations, vectors of racial, disabled, transnational, and genderqueer identity influence trans people's sexual practices and self-expressions. A lineage of resistance to dominant media suggests that oppositional trans representations evolve and shift as media access and technology change. Based on our discussion here, I would argue against reducing trans sexuality (or any sexuality) to a biology-based equation of gender identity and object choice.

QM: Again, a historical view is crucial to understanding the aesthetics of tumblr's pre-Yahoo! moment and its facilitation of queer trans creativity. As people migrate to Tumblr, the spaces they create take on many forms. The website becomes a laboratory for erotic experimentation, a canvas for the collective depiction of trans desires, and a living archive of sexual attraction.

MF: Queer trans sex cultures online broaden and expand the available range of embodied representations of transness. Online queer praxis informed by trans experience creates new possibilities for the articulation of complex sexual desires, as well as for the radical gendering of trans bodies. In the period we studied, sexuality materialized not as a sequestered physical occurrence but as an extension of the daily and broader experiences of gender, disability, race, class, age, colonialism, medicalization, and media representation that converge to inform trans people's complex daily lives. I was especially intrigued by the ways in which, on the site, broad facets of everyday experience and personal expression countered the fetishizing practices of dominant media by expanding the conceptual scope of what trans sexual representation might entail.

QM: Issues of aesthetics and medium specificity have been equally striking. Lately, I have been preoccupied by the question of how long the queer trans Tumblr renaissance will last—or if it is already over. From a queer trans perspective, the threat of Tumblr's monetization is situated within ongoing legacies of misrepresentation, corporation-driven cultural appropriation, and assimilation by way of media conglomeration.

MF: Right. While digital sites demonstrate the potential for broadening the already expansive worlds of queer, trans, and genderqueer cultures, dominant structures continue to dictate what we can search for and find online. This is Juhasz's whole point. In my view, digital culture is a duplicitous space; the Internet maintains the primacy of dominant voices even as it offers exciting possibilities for expanding trans self-representations. Overall, gendered and sexual norms prevail even online, where technological access and anonymity often fuels gender and sexual policing, as well as outpours of racism, ableism, and classism that obscure the cultural presence of already marginalized voices. Yet, as tumblr would suggest, moving beyond stable constructions

of gender, sexuality, ability, racial, national, and trans categories is partly what renders many of us DTF IRL.

QM: Whether or not the site continues to be a central venue for such a queer ethos, trans tumblr use pre-Yahoo! offers a glimpse into a radically transformed set of possibilities for self-representation for people whose everyday lives and art practices are, although incomprehensible within dominant ideology, flourishing online and off.

*From at least 2011 to 2013, people collectively oriented in opposition to dominant discourses of gender and sexuality used Tumblr to refashion straight cisgender norms and to create everyday art in a hybrid media space.*

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