

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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## **Negative Affect and Trans Poetry**

*Towards an Ethical-Reparative Reading*

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[ABSTRACT: This paper proposes an ethical-reparative reading of trans poetry to understand the potential of negative affects, such as shame, estrangement, and failure. It approaches reading as a practice imbued with ethical and political challenges, seeking to envision a trans-feminist integration that values both the emotions and the ethical responsibilities involved in the act of reading. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Derek Attridge, and Heather Love, it contrasts paranoid reading practices that pathologise trans bodies with reparative approaches that remain open to strangeness, ambiguity, and affective complexity. Through close readings of Aimee Herman's "i/dentity (packed)," *Dia B's* "Submission," and *Danez Smith's* "recklessly", the paper examines how experimental poetic forms resist the pathologisation, legal regulation, and cultural policing of gender non-conforming bodies. These works destabilise binary notions of gender, reclaim subjugated bodily narratives, and expose the injustices embedded in medico-legal discourses, feminist exclusionary politics, and societal paranoia about gender diversity. Embracing uncertainty and "backwardness", trans poetry challenges normative aesthetics and articulates an alternative politics of survival that affirms vulnerability, opacity, and an ethical demand to read otherwise. Ultimately, the paper argues that a conscious ethical choice of adopting a reparative reading of trans poetry not only reveals the social injustices that produce negative affect but also affirms such affect as a mode of life and survival. KEYWORDS: trans poetry, negative affect, reparative reading]

In *The Terrible We*, Cameron Awkward-Rich (2022), a poet and scholar of trans theory and expressive culture, references an instance of transmisogyny that masquerades as feminist concern. This instance, a case study that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in October 2014, opens a debate on the position of trans people in historically women's institutions (Padawer, 2014). While this issue appears to be institutional, it is also a challenge for expanding spaces marked as feminist to include people marginalised by gender. The debate poses a set of questions that includes whether trans people should be allowed in women's colleges, whether a feminist space is meant for women alone, and, if so, what defines a woman. Awkward-Rich argues that the anxiety surrounding trans men in women's institutions, which erupted in the second decade of the twenty-first century, reveals one crucial thing: that times recur and, therefore, it is "worthwhile to develop tools for bearing this recurrence" (2022, p. 68). This recurring issue stems from the complex histories of trans and feminist ideological positions. To address this recurrence, Awkward-Rich advocates for reading trans texts, focusing on the figure of the "depressed transsexual" as a means of reclaiming the image of transgender people as people and bodies that are haunted, depressed, or impaired. Even in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, where gender identity disorder was replaced with gender dysphoria to remove the stigma of pathology and medical regulation of trans identities, he notes that transness becomes officially codified as an unbearable feeling (Awkward-Rich, 2022, p. 147). Focusing on this 'unbearable feeling', his work explores what reading with depressive habits of feeling and thought might reveal about the discourses and conditions that produce them. This paper, while primarily concerned with trans poetry, engages with a similar question to Awkward-Rich's: what does trans poetry reveal about the social conditions that produce negative affect? It approaches reading as a practice imbued with ethical and political challenges, advocating for an ethical-reparative framework for understanding the negative affect in trans poetry. This framework seeks to envision a trans-feminist integration that values both the emotions and the ethical responsibilities involved in the act of reading. Initially, the paper briefly addresses the widespread paranoia surrounding gender ideology, underscoring the need for an ethical approach to bridge the rift between radical feminist and trans-ideological positions. Further, adopting a critical framework that engages with the works of Eve Sedgwick, Derek Attridge, and Heather Love, the paper argues that the act of reading, one that engages with the otherness posed by both the experimental form and content of trans poetry, makes an ethical demand on the reader to engage with new possibilities for thought and habit. Finally, through close readings of poetry by Danez Smith, Aimee Herman, and Dia B, the paper demonstrates how making an ethical choice in interpreting negative affect in trans poetry can reveal the societal injustices that give rise to it. It also shows how living with the negative affects of shame, estrangement, and a sense of failure becomes both a way of life and survival.

Judith Butler, in the recent book *Who's Afraid of Gender* (2024), highlights the growing global paranoia surrounding gender, which is taking the form of an 'anti-gender movement'. They argue that this movement stems from a psycho-social phenomenon where fears and anxieties are channelled into political mobilisations. This mobilisation manifests across various areas, including education, politics, and religion, with the concept of gender as a threat infiltrating institutional spaces and state policies. According to Butler, "Across the world, various forms of nationalism effectively seek to expel gender from the idea of the nation, suggesting that equality and freedom reigned before this 'intrusion' made it seem otherwise" (2024, p. 25). They further observe that the attack on what is called 'gender ideology' is simultaneously an assault on

feminism, particularly, reproductive rights, as well as on trans rights, gay marriage, and sex education (Butler, 2024, p. 41). While this ideological attack disproportionately affects women, it is paradoxical that many women, often those claiming to be radical feminists, are at the forefront of defending the view that ‘woman’ is biologically determined and fixed. This paranoia surrounding gender diversity has also seeped into literary circles and academia, where we see a denial of the existence of trans people, the removal of gender-inclusive curricula from educational institutions<sup>1</sup> and a resurgence of the biologically dimorphic theory of gender.

The paradoxical position of women who claim to be radical feminists becomes evident in the reasons that J. K. Rowling, the writer, puts across for speaking out on sex and gender issues on her website. Her tweet in support of Maya Forstater, who lost her job for expressing the transphobic view that transgender women cannot change their biological sex, was met with widespread backlash. In her public explanation, Rowling speaks of the sense of otherness and ambivalence about being a woman. When this experience of estrangement from one’s own body comes out of one’s urge to belong to the rigid boxes of the gender binary, to reaffirm the need to have a biologically essential gender binary is to preclude the possibility of learning from experiences of being in between the male and female genders. The fear that trans people ‘erode’ the political and biological category of women seems to drive Rowling’s defence of a strictly binary view of gender, positioning her as someone attempting to ‘educate’ the public on trans issues (Rowling, 2020). This reactionary stance illustrates the fear and resistance that gender diversity evokes in those committed to preserving a traditional, biologically determined understanding of gender. This perception of trans people’s experiences as ones that are to be regulated, invisibilised, or pathologised has subjugated the subjective knowledge of trans people for centuries. It was only in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that transgender studies as a discipline could emerge, after centuries of subjugation within the hierarchy of disparate forms of knowledge. In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker states that this field of study “...calls attention to ‘transgender effects,’ those deconstructive moments when foreground and background seem to flip and reverse, and the spectacle of an unexpected gender phenomenon illuminates the production of gender normativity in a startling new way. In doing so, the field begins to tell new stories about things many of us thought we already knew” (2006, p.13).

While the paranoia surrounding gender and sexual difference, along with the knowledge systems addressing gender issues, may seem ahistorical, the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick situates the paranoia and paranoid reading of texts that prevailed during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s in her book, *Touching Feeling* (2003). In this book, Sedgwick argues that although paranoia was interpreted as a reflection of repressed homosexual desire in Freud’s psychoanalytic formulations, it also became a significant subject in the anti-homophobic theory of the 1980s. Guy Hocquenghem, in his work *Homosexual Desire* (1978), posits that paranoia can be read not only as a sign of repressed homosexuality but also as a means of highlighting the homophobic tendencies and heterosexual enforcement against it. These homophobic tendencies became evident in the resurgence of HIV criminalisation laws in the US, which were originally adopted in response to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s but were still being enforced in the twenty-first century. The poet Danez Smith, who identifies as genderqueer and HIV-positive, addresses the paranoia surrounding HIV even in the twenty-first century, in their poem “recklessly”, published in the 2017 collection of poetry titled *Don’t Call Us Dead*, which will be analysed closely later in this paper. Rather than employing a critical reading practice driven by

suspicion, one that scrutinises repression of desires or gender dysphoria as clear pathological signs of transgression from normative gender expressions and sexual behaviours, Sedgwick suggests that one can also approach a text with a reparative reading practice. This practice, she argues, is communal, historically rich, and capable of producing alternative historiographies. Specifically, in examining the queer-identified practice of camp and the paranoid reading that became prevalent in critical theory, Sedgwick claims that queer theorists who emphasise the performativity of gender often overlook the possibility of reparative readings. Highlighting how reparative reading helps us understand the lived experiences associated with camp, she writes: “To view camp as the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to be able to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance...” (2003, p. 112). For Sedgwick, reparative reading invites us to approach texts with openness to affective connections that may be indeterminate or negative.

### Ethical-Reparative Reading

The recent ‘affective turn’ in cultural and critical studies, particularly in relation to the body, has shifted the focus from discipline, ideology, and subject identity to an analysis of the body’s affective capacities. This turn has been instrumental in understanding queer and trans\* becomings and queer feelings as they appear in texts and in the reading experience. It opens up the potential for reading to create a social imaginary that fosters different modes of belonging and affective relations between the bodies represented in texts and those of the readers. When reading a text, a reader who approaches it with anxiety and paranoid determination may seek to avoid unpleasant surprises, presupposing that the text will humiliate them, thus steering clear of it altogether. In contrast, adopting a reparative stance while reading—a conscious engagement with an unfamiliar or estranging text—allows a reader to experience it as new and realistic, and offers an ethical opportunity to confront negative affects such as pain, shame or humiliation. As Sedgwick (2003) puts it,

I think it will leave us in a vastly better position to do justice to a wealth of characteristic, culturally central practices, many of which can well be called reparative, that emerge from queer experience but become invisible or illegible under a paranoid optic. (p. 147)

The affect theorists concerned with biological sciences often describe affect as autonomous intensities of the body’s response to outside stimuli, becomings, and singularities. In contrast, Sedgwick, drawing on Silvan Tomkins’ theory of affect<sup>2</sup>, situates affective relations within speech acts and performances. These two understandings of affect intersect when considering the act of reading<sup>3</sup>. Close attention to the reading process reveals a hegemonic affective relation that pervades the interpretation of texts. This understanding also opens up the possibility of adopting an ethical choice in reading. Derek Attridge (2004) demonstrates how a reader’s histories and contextual formations shape their response to the singularity of a text, which is also open to reinterpretation. The potential for reinterpretation appears as one engages with the inventive and experimental kind of form that the text adopts and the sense of ‘otherness’ that the text evokes in its reader. He argues, “There is thus an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification or literary response, and there is also a sense in which the formally

innovative text, the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand” (Attridge, 2004, p. 11).

The complex visual and textual grammar that trans poetry employs is one such experience that estranges the reader, pushing them to read beyond familiar and dominant modes of interpretation. Since the structures of feeling within society shape a reader’s approach to a text, it is crucial to challenge the affective norms embedded within reading cultures. This engagement with a text can occur only if the reader makes an ethical choice to remain open to ‘otherness’. Rather than reading trans poetry as merely a piece of modern or postmodern literary aesthetics, self-reflexive and claiming an ‘otherness’ that cannot be expressed in available discourse, trans critics like Kate Bornstein (1994) and Jay Prosser (1998) identify the formal innovations in trans literary works as an expression of transgender style. While trans aesthetics may intersect with postmodernism, conflating trans style with the postmodern style of writing risks erasing the trans politics embedded in these works. The experimental trans style of writing, which demands more careful reading than a conventional narrative, incorporates body narrative. Jay Prosser describes trans narrative as “trans-genre”, “a text that exists between genres, just as its subject exists between genders” (1998, p. 191). Trans narratives, therefore, merge the aesthetics and politics of transgender identities and lives.

### Trans Poetry and Negative Affect

Alongside the emerging ‘visual grammar’ created by trans artists worldwide, trans poetry offers space for visual experiments that merge politics, aesthetics, and emotion. Trans critics, Reina Gosset, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Buton (2013) emphasise in their book, *Trap Door*, the need to distinguish between radical political actions within trans communities and the rights-based politics surrounding trans identity that align with the neoliberal drive for assimilation. These critics uncover the complexities of becoming visible as a trans person and being legible to others. The politics of becoming imperceptible, invisible, and unreadable open new avenues for representing trans people who resist adopting dominant patterns of visibility, cultural intelligibility, and assimilation. Aimee Herman’s trans poetry, published in *Troubling the Line* by T. C. Tolbert and Trace Peterson (2013), exemplifies a poetic style that plays with the concepts of visuality and visibility. It adopts a style of writing that is tinged with negative affect.

Theoretically, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick proposes that the study of affect involves an interpretive practice that shifts away from traditional criticism, which seeks to uncover the truths obscured by socio-cultural processes. Following Sedgwick’s call for a reparative reading practice, the critic, Heather Love, in *Feeling Backward*, analyses the intertwined states of paranoid and reparative reading, adopting a descriptive rather than critical methodology. Love argues that emphasising a past filled with trauma can expose ongoing social inequalities, violence, and exclusionary strategies against queer people. She insists on the importance of reclaiming abandoned identities and histories of injury, stating, “I insist on the importance of clinging to ruined identities and histories of injury. Resisting the call of gay normalisation means refusing to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead” (Love, 2007, p. 30). Love further elaborates on what she means by ‘backwardness’ in queer experience. “Backwardness means many things here: shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame. I

describe backwardness both as a queer historical structure of feeling and as a model for queer historiography” (2007, p. 146). This ‘backwardness’ can be located in the poetry of Aimee Herman, where the tension between impossibilities, uncertainties, embarrassment, and ambivalence is explored through reflections on bodily experiences tied to various understandings of gender. In her poem “i/dentity (packed)”, Herman reflects on a label, not explicitly gendered, but clearly hinting at a label assigned by a medical institution. The poem’s intermittent italicised lines delve into the poet’s sense of gender and body, which, in turn, function as a social critique. The non-italicised lines seem to recount encounters with medical settings, where the body, difficult to categorise or label, becomes a subject of paranoia. The reader is invited into the poem’s dialogic construction, which emphasises the uncertainty surrounding gender and sexuality.

The poem engages with the pathological label ‘deviation’ often attributed to gender non-conforming individuals. Herman’s use of “I” in phrases like “i/dentity” and “gen.i.tals” disrupts the conventional notion of gender identity, and clearly communicates the urge of the self to sever its relation with a particular kind of gender identity that presents the sense of “I” or the individual as one that is not freed from the in-betweenness of genitalia-centered gender markers. The poem seems to parody medical interpretations of an intersex body, beginning with an examination of abdominal muscles labelled as “NORMAL,” followed by a playful inversion of the adage ‘An apple a day keeps the doctor away’, rewritten as “one hundred sit-ups per day FLATTENS THE IT AWAY” (Tolbert and Peterson, 2013, p. 36). The poet’s declaration, “call me deviation”, and the sudden introduction of “inter SEX” invite readers to consider the body as intersex or inhabiting a space between sexes. However, the line, “between legs a fist rises/ MUTINY” (Tolbert and Peterson, 2013, p. 36) introduces the paradox of a body that both resists and conforms to the normative expectations of gender. The opening lines present both the malleable and the resistant body. The fist that rises between the legs could be read as a form of resistance that refuses to comply with the normative descriptions of the body, a body that does not passively receive the inscriptions of gender, but is active in crossing the normative notions of a ‘normal’ body. The use of bracketed first-person pronouns in “when (I) was six” (Tolbert and Peterson, 2013, p. 36) emphasises the poet’s individualised experience, distinct from external perceptions.

With visceral description, Herman recalls their childhood and the self-imposed silence and pain experienced due to the imposition of gender labels, in the line, “tore out a section of my neck where the label sat. where the/ label rubbed” (Tolbert and Peterson, 2013, p. 36). The lines, “where the label reconstructed [my] structure. where the label took away my sensation. where the label told/ {me} how to pee. where the label disguised {me}. Discussed {me}. DISgusts {me}” convey the estrangement the poet feels from their body, an estrangement shaped by medical and cultural discourses around gender (Tolbert and Peterson, 2013, p. 36). This disgust and estrangement emerge from the gender label that “took away sensation” from the poet. It has the power to overwrite the poet’s sense of self, particularly as the medical establishment imposes its definitions of gender through corrective surgeries exercised on an intersex infant’s body thereby denying the subject the agency to define themselves. The genitalia-centred reading and understanding of gender that the medical institution primarily adopts is criticised in the stanza that makes a note of the practices followed when the birth of an intersex child is considered as a medical emergency. However, for the poet, it happens to be a process of disfiguring one’s body; they articulate it as “understand this need to disfigure”. The critique of genitalia-centred



embodiment. Gender becomes a label and a tape that is forcefully stuck on one's body, mostly without the consent of the subject, and it causes damage that one is likely to live with. The poem deliberates on and reinstates a life of failures as a viable way of living that unveils the subtle injustices and inequalities tolerated in one's everyday life.

In this way, Herman's experimental use of form and language challenges the medicalisation and objectification of trans bodies. The poem critiques how dominant gender norms erase individual agency and silence those who do not conform to binary gender expectations. As Edouard Glissant articulates the politics of exclusion and inclusion in a politically 'just' society,

Live in seclusion or open up to the other: this was supposedly the only alternative for any population demanding the right to speak its own language. It is how inherited premises of centuries-old domination were given legitimacy. Either you speak a language that is 'universal' or on its way to being so, and participate in the life of the world; or else you retreat into your particular idiom—quite unfit for sharing—in which case you cut yourself off from the world to wallow alone and sterile in your so-called identity. (1997, p. 103)

The one who refuses to adopt the universal language may be left alone to live a miserable and 'backward' life, but that could still be a viable alternative way of life for some. Therefore, trans poetry particularly refuses to adopt a universal language, be it in terms of presenting the bodily experiences in verse/prosaic verse form or a universal language of gender that marks out the different as 'deviant' or 'a lie'. This style of writing the body into existence thereby questions the universally accepted canonical beliefs surrounding living a good life and having a normative gendered body. By adopting an aesthetics that stands outside the normative standards of art, deliberately setting up the subject as unreadable and invisible and sharing negative affect and its presence in trans and queer lives, trans poetry questions the injustices embedded within society.

Aimee Herman's poetry, therefore, invites readers to reconsider the body as a site of both resistance and vulnerability, one that is unstable and malleable. In the blog entry, "This Is How to Remove Yourself from a Body", Herman reflects, "What I am trying to say is: there is no story inside the body that doesn't deserve a voice, a notebook to scream into, a place to exhale all its blood and shiver. I am still forming. I am still deciding who I am. I am still removing myself from this body sometimes. I am still learning how to survive being in it" (Herman, 2021). It is precisely the same perception of the body that allows them to ask the reader to call them a question mark, which seeks answers, rather than concluding one's understanding of one's own body as tied to a particular gender identity that refuses to accommodate the complexities of bodily differences.

Aimee Herman's poem describes the paranoid reading of the body that medical institutions adopt and how they pathologise and paralyse one's body to an extent where the subject finds it difficult to adopt a gender and therefore calls the body "IT" and a "question mark". Meanwhile, the poem, "Submission", published in the anthology of queer poetry from South Asia, edited by Akhil Katyal and Aditi Angiras, *The World that Belongs to Us* and written by Dia B from India, who identifies as a trans person, shares the experience of their body that is bound by legal and political ideas of personhood and a gendered body.

In “Submission”, the poet presents the body as one that she doesn’t possess. She engages with the politics of ‘personhood’ that creates an illusion for a human being, suggesting that they possess some rights over their own body and, therefore, own their own body. Reminding the reader that the right to name one’s body is reserved with the person who inhabits the body, she says, “I say it/ not he or she or them/ those are for the person inside this body” (Angiras and Katyal, 2020, p. 225). Here again, the negation of one’s understanding of one’s own self that occurs as one comes in contact with society is highlighted. Having autonomy over one’s own body becomes impossible as one is subjected to another person’s gaze, and hence, there exists a chance of being erroneously recognised by another person. She experiences a body that is “wrenching, writhing/ with unbounded desire/ a body/ pathologized, taxonomized/ made symmetrical/ to fit a curriculum” (Angiras and Katyal, 2020, p. 226). Like Herman, Dia B also presents the paradoxical nature of the body that appears to be resistant and uncontrollable, yet becomes malleable, regulated and compartmentalised to meet the needs of a curriculum that doesn’t acknowledge the presence of gender non-conforming bodies. In this poem, the poet also presents the body that cannot be felt physically for “it looks to its own scars/ with gratefulness” (Angiras and Katyal, 2020, p. 225). The body with scars can be one with memories of a wound or an incision in flesh, that passes on the feeling of precarity, vulnerability, a wound that might have just healed, or an incision that is capable of evoking memories of pain. The scars can be read as an entry to one’s memory of a body; it is the mark on the physical body that helps the person relate to the past. Here, the scar acts like a source to connect to one’s memory, one’s past and perhaps, one’s self too.

Dia B compares her body to that of a butterfly, which is a common trope in trans narratives, including poetry. This metaphorical comparison to a butterfly shows both the possibility and potential that a body holds to transform, as well as its helplessness in the hands of the powerful. The body of a trans person is often subjected to scrutiny to categorise the body into the binaries of gender. This body is studied, pathologised and taxonomised and nailed to a board as a taxidermist’s prize. The poem states, “Taxonomy is taxidermy”, a sister tells me/ from her perch/ ...she speaks like a hammer/ my dear, dear sister” (Angiras and Katyal, 2020, p. 226), which positions the taxonomist at a higher pedestal who takes the life out of the subject they learn about and taxonomise. “Taxonomy is taxidermy” reminds us of the way a person’s body is subjected to display, exhibition or study, just because the body does not fit into the rigid categories of male or female. Being different from the normative bodies is reason enough for people in power to deprive one of all the entitlements of personhood.

Alluding to the philosopher, Michel Foucault’s work, *Society Must Be Defended*, the lines, “For it is so well understood/ ‘society must be defended’/ knowledge must stay sacred/ the body must be bound” (Angiras and Katyal, 2020, p. 226) evoke the societal tendency to control and suppress certain forms of knowledge. In this context, it highlights how the subjective knowledge of a trans person about their own body is often subordinated, constrained, and disregarded. It also reminds one of a bound body as a docile body that is subjected to torture and discipline, so that it does not resist coercion of any kind. It is again a feeling of failure that the poem evokes, a failure imposed by the institutions that work on paranoia. Since this paranoia propels one to avoid humiliation or surprise that a gender non-confirming person’s body and their experiences can evoke, the person themselves is silenced and invisibilised in the physical world as well as in the fictional world. It is only when one adopts a reparative reading that one can see the

repercussions of this paranoia and empathetically relate to the person and their experiences that the literary works present. The poem offers an alternative perception of the legal conception of personhood dominant in the world, one that law fails to capture. It shows that a narrow legal framework not only fails to eradicate the violence against trans people but also perpetrates violence.

The genderqueer poet, Danez Smith, in their poem “recklessly”, which is written in a fragmented, collage-like form, explores the experiences of being black, queer, and HIV positive. The poem is dedicated to Michael Johnson, a former Missouri college student who was convicted for failing to disclose his HIV-positive status to sexual partners, and received a ten-year prison sentence. Among the various voices in the poem, his voice stands out as the dominant one. This poem responds to the medico-legal interpretations of a body with illness. It extends the legal concept of personhood, as discussed by Dia B in the poem “Submission”, to address the biases and identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality that shape both legal trials and societal judgment. The opening lines, “the bloodprison leads to prison/ jail doubles as quarantine”, introduce a metaphorical lens through which the reader views the experience of a HIV positive person being reduced to his blood with the ‘contaminated’ blood itself becoming a prison (Smith, 2017, p. 29). This reduction confines the individual to a criminal identity, underscoring the mechanisms of HIV criminalisation. The line, “prison doubling as quarantine” evokes the historical connection between queerness and the AIDS epidemic, where queerness, like AIDS, had been treated like a contagion, forcing isolation and inflicting shame. The voices of those who imprison Michael Johnson: “you’re under arrest, under a spell/ are you on treatment? PrEP? (wats dat?)/ venom: sin: snake: cocksize” highlight the way prisons strip away privacy and dignity (Smith, 2017, p. 29). The stark imagery of venom, sin, snakes, and cocksize evokes a stigmatised, racialised stereotype of Black queer bodies as disease-ridden, sexually dangerous, and marked as sinful and threatening because non-procreative. This stereotype emerges from the paranoia surrounding the identification of Black queer men as disease carriers. The line, “the diagnosis is judgment enough,” speaks to the judicial, medical and societal condemnation of people living with HIV (Smith, 2017, p. 29). In Johnson’s case, the trial was coloured by racial and homophobic prejudices that haunted the AIDS epidemic since the 1980s. The phrase “but you don’t know my name/ don’t ask. don’t tell” alludes to the U.S. military’s infamous ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy, which reflected institutionalised discrimination against queer individuals (Smith, 2017, p. 29).

Smith’s poem illustrates how “a history of blood” is intrinsically tied to queer identity and how this connection subjects individuals to dehumanising legal, medical and societal experiences. The line “many stories about queerness are about shame” emphasises the vulnerability of queer people, who are often made to endure the oppressive gaze of others (Smith, 2017, p. 29). While shame has historically been a tool of oppression and regulation for the queer community, this poem also reveals the complex identity politics of queerness, a history laden with regret, fear, loss, and, above all, shame. Smith suggests that this shame, embodied in both the individual’s body and the body of work from queer writers, becomes a source of isolation and suffering. In the poem, blood and HIV are used interchangeably to illustrate how the disease becomes a mechanism to erase one’s existence and history. The line “a history of blood: from sacrament to sentence/ the red the white the blue of my veins” highlights the internalised perception of one’s self intertwined with the legal, medical and religious perception of a body with HIV positive status as one that has sinned and is subject to punishment (Smith, 2017, p. 30). As medical

advancements have turned HIV from a death sentence into a manageable condition, Smith suggests that the disease is no longer just about death, but a sentence —“it’s not a death sentence anymore/ it’s not death anymore/ it’s more/ it’s a sentence” (Smith, 2017, p. 32). The repetition of the word “sentence” implies both the legal judgment and an expression of art, which can be a set of words that is semantically complete in itself, a source for artistic expression of one’s suffering that remains open to interpretation.

The closing lines, “in our blood men hold each other/ like they’ll never let go/ then they let go”, reinforce the duality running through the poem (Smith, 2017, p. 33). Blood here evokes both a literal connection between people and the fragility of those connections, especially in the face of HIV and its associated stigma. Blood is metaphorically linked to passion, emotions, relationships, sacrifice, and survival. Yet, in the context of AIDS, it also represents vulnerability, illness, and the invisible, all-encompassing threat of the virus. In a broader sense, blood symbolises society’s collective response to the epidemic: a matter of both personal and public health that affects not only the individual’s body but also the lives of many who suffer from the stigma of being both queer and HIV-positive. However, the same blood that stands for life and passion, which brings men together, becomes a source for division and isolation when someone is identified as HIV-positive. Smith’s “recklessly” delves into the intersectional struggles of race, gender, sexuality, and illness, using blood and blood cells as metaphors to navigate the complexities of shame, stigma, and survival within both the legal and medical systems in particular, and society, in general. The poem’s fragmented form mirrors the disjointed, often contradictory experiences of those living with HIV, while offering a potent commentary on the enduring consequences of marginalisation and criminalisation.

In conclusion, Danez Smith’s “recklessly” intertwines the personal and political, using the body and its blood as metaphors for both identity and suffering in the context of illness, race, and queerness. Through fragmented language and the voices that populate the poem, Smith explores how HIV criminalisation and racial biases intersect with the lived experiences of marginalised individuals, particularly those who are black, queer, and HIV-positive. By invoking the history of ‘contaminated’ and ‘contagious’ blood and AIDS, Smith critiques societal and legal systems that reduce human lives to medical conditions and stereotypes, while also illuminating the deep emotional and psychological toll of shame and isolation. The poem’s complexity, drawing on both the literal and metaphorical meanings of blood, offers a poignant commentary on the ongoing struggle for dignity and justice by underscoring how legal, medical, social, and cultural forces continue to shape the identities and experiences of those at the intersection of multiple, stigmatised identities. Ultimately, “recklessly” is a call for reflection and change, urging its reader to reconsider the treatment of those deemed ‘other’, and to recognise the humanity in every individual, regardless of their blood, gender, body, sexuality or history.

The poems discussed in this paper emphasise the uncertain and ambiguous nature of the body. Adopting an ethical-reparative reading helps the reader see the effects of perceiving a trans body as one that requires a cure or as a pathologised body. This perception of a trans body as pathological stymies the possibility of crossing the boundaries of gender. When all bodies are capable of experiencing desire and pain, recognising these emotions in some bodies but not others reduces those ‘other’ bodies to mere objects. This objectification denies the body’s essential connection to personhood, undermining the right of transgender individuals to claim the privileges of full humanity. This perception of bodies as objects, rather than identifying

bodies as a part of one's self, a person entitled to the privileges of personhood, inherently violates transgender bodies. The paranoid reading of a text might help in understanding a body as one that is to be bound, categorised, policed, regulated and compartmentalised. A reparative reading of a text that is challenging in its form and perception of the body allows one to make an extra effort to engage with its strangeness and empathetically experience the failure and ambiguity encountered when one tries to align one's bodily perception with another person's perception of the same body. These poetic expressions of the body embrace negative affect and show the reader the possibility of living with uncertainties and ambiguities, while also exposing societal injustices.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2021, the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) of India removed a teachers' training manual on the integration of transgender or gender non-conforming students in schools from its website. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ncert-removes-manual-on-inclusion-of-transgender-from-website-1873989-2021-11-07>.

<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick adopts Tomkins's psychobiological approach to affect, wherein affects are qualitatively categorised as negative and positive. Negative affects of fear, shame, distress, and suspicion are likely to create a bodily response that prepares one to defend or withdraw from a perceived threat of being humiliated, since avoiding this harm becomes biologically crucial for survival. Drawing on this understanding that affective relations are embedded in speech acts and performances, Sedgwick shows how reparative reading can be an ethical choice of reading.

<sup>3</sup> Wan Chua Kao's chapter, "The Body in Wonder: Affective Suspension and Medieval Queer Futurity" in *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice* (2019), edited by Stephen Ahern, explains how the different theories of affect, the Spinoza-Deleuzian-Brian Massumi thought and the Silvan Tomkins thought, intersect.

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