*Hypatia* (2025), **40**, 269–289
doi:10.1017/hyp.2024.61

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

# Ambivalences of Trans Recognition

Jules Wong

The Pennsylvania State University
Email: jmwongphil@gmail.com

(Received 20 February 2023; revised 30 January 2024; accepted 10 April 2024; first published online 12 September 2024)

**Abstract**

The need for gender recognition is widespread, even when hypervisibility and other effects of trans antagonism make that need dangerous for trans people. This reason partially accounts for why, in trans critique, recognition is a dirty word. As a political aim, and to some extent as a moral norm, trans critiques encourage dropping recognition. On the other hand, social philosophers often view recognition as a solution to misrecognition and take recognition to be a remedy for injustice. In my view, recognition should neither be dropped nor held as a foundational norm for trans emancipation. First, I present three ways trans recognition is ambivalent. Second, evaluating Axel Honneth's observations about the entwinement of recognition and domination, I argue that recognition is an ambivalent norm for trans critique and struggle. Third, I propose studying trans recognitive practices (rather than recognition in abstract) and I illuminate what might set trans/t4t recognition acts apart from their cis-grounded analogues, centering the roles of the body and space/place as resources of trans/t4t recognitive practices, and how such practices focus on the subject's change and becoming over their identification.

Despite all the talk—in mainstream politics, at least—about the personal, social, and political goods that arise with recognition, gender recognition is an ambivalent affair for trans people and others who wrestle with the rules, norms, and practices that make this recognition possible. Trans theorists have documented good reasons to be wary of recognition, citing its exclusionary and normalizing modes, as well its ineffectiveness as a politics that might win gains in relieving or eliminating the poverty, criminalization, and violence faced by trans people. But should we conclude recognition has no use for trans critique? I say "no." Nor should we agree with normative recognition theory that recognition is a straightforward good. I argue that recognition is an ambivalent norm for trans emancipation and, looking to embodied poetics as recognitive practices, I show its place in immanent trans critique.

Trans theorists have condemned recognition as transnormative. *Transnormativity* is a hegemonic model of transition that is "sanitized" of its complexity for the purposes of acceptance by cis people, and assumes that transitions progress towards "completion" modeled on cis gender presentations (Juang 2006; Johnson 2016; Puar 2017; Alabanza

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Hypatia, a Nonprofit Corporation. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2023). In the process of securing transition-related care, a transnormative narrative is usually required to be recognizable *as trans*, which systematically misconstrues the aims, wishes, and needs of those subjectivated through it (Prosser 1998; Spade 2006). Not only does transnormativity foreclose the non-linear, choppy, unending, or non-surgical transitions of many trans people; it also presupposes relatively high degrees of wealth and a self-understanding through a "born in the wrong body" narrative that is embedded in cis standards of embodiment that are used to dominate and oppress all people who fall short. Moreover, the dominant expression of recognition as a politics has been critiqued due to the subjectivity that it animates to be recognized—one that is victimized by hateful violence. The mechanism and form of dominant trans recognition politics, which makes use of legal recognition through hate-crime laws and proliferates the "trans as victim" subjectivity, obscures real patterns of violence against trans people by *homogenizing* trans identities and the antagonisms that trans people endure differentially due to class, race, precarity, and ability (Westbrook 2021).[1] When it is the selective public affirmation of trans identity, trans recognition palliates emancipatory demands (Spade 2015; Aizura 2017), often by instrumentalizing the deaths of trans people of color, especially trans femmes of color (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). In the light of these observations, recognition is a dirty word in trans critique.

In contrast, social philosophers often argue that recognition is a good because it is necessary to develop and maintain a subject's freedom. For instance, in Axel Honneth's view, the process of recognition is an affirmative perception of an other's real value or "evaluative qualities" (Honneth 2002), which supports their standing as "a fully-fledged, equal member in view of [a social] order's established standards" (Honneth 2021a, 577).[2] In this view, recognition is a fundamental need because it develops and sustains the self-love, self-respect, and self-esteem necessary for autonomy, and the expansion of recognition is the fundamental ethical and political aim. Normative theorists of recognition would remind critics that recognition is the object of struggle, and judgments of mis- or failed recognition presuppose a concept of recognition that serves as a standard.

This paper forges a dialogue between trans theory and social philosophy, bridging the normative concerns of each. It is also animated by the "ground-bound" spirit of trans philosophy named by Talia Mae Bettcher (2019), because it aims to clarify the mundane dissatisfaction and inefficacy of gender recognition, while also suggesting that ambivalence might form an important part of trans philosophy's normative framework. My aim is to defend recognition's ambivalence in practice and as a norm, against views that recognition ought to be dropped from the trans normative lexicon or that it ought to be its organizing principle. Recognition is both good and bad, and when it is good it is also bad.[3] My argument concerns intersubjective recognition, rather than recognition by the state and the legal freedom it may grant.

I elucidate three ambivalences of gender recognition in a study of clocking and trans visibility (§1). Clocking is literally recognition of a person's transness, which implies that person's failing to pass, being spotted in their transness, and losing realness. There, I make the case that visibility and recognition are interdependent. This includes a discussion of hypervisibility and the associated psychic ambivalence that might explain why more representation does not produce social affirmation. I then situate the significance of my arguments in a critical dialogue with the limitations of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition (§2). Honneth's theory has spawned a rich literature on recognition in social and political philosophy. It is worth engaging because, in alignment with trans critique, it forwards an intricate critical methodology that tethers social

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

justice to actual historical struggles. Furthermore, issues of gender recognition, especially of gender inequality, have been central in Honneth's normative recognition theory. My perspective joins that of feminists who have evaluated the usefulness of his theory for feminist justice (McNay 2008; McNay 2021). This section examines how Honneth admits the possibility that recognition may cause domination and develops this topic through the ambivalences of trans recognition presented in §1. This allows me to show that clocking ought to count as recognition, even in this normative theory of recognition. I suggest that Honneth's attempts to "save" recognition from normative ambivalence do not succeed and conclude that recognition is ambivalent as a norm for trans emancipation.

Then, I consider trans/t4t recognition practices, or recognition within/by/for trans people as embodied poetics (§3). In addition to proposing a shift away from a *theory* of recognition towards a study of recognitive practices, I illuminate what might set trans/t4t recognition acts apart from their cis-grounded analogues. I center the roles of the body and space/place as resources of trans/t4t recognitive practices. I also explain how such practices focus on the subject's change and becoming over their identification, to explain how they offer *better* entries into and affirmation of subjectivity than cis-normativity provides. I conclude by considering the critical force of trans recognitive practices, and chart paths in theory and praxis towards the continued critical analysis of recognition (§4).

## 1. Getting clocked

Being clocked designates being spotted as trans, losing realness, failing to pass. Clocking inscribes the demands of cis-normativity within an act of seeing a person as trans. Simply being spotted as gender nonconforming is being clocked. Clocking is staring a bit too long, puzzling over the person between their body and its presentation. Clocking is often weaponized to challenge the coherence of trans people, amounting to the enforcement of cis-normative ideas about the world which are taken to be reality proper (Bettcher 2014). Eric A. Stanley approximates clocking and recognition for the simple reason that being seen as trans is both required for acknowledgment and also, if not simultaneously, the precipitant to violent attack (2021, 86).

To begin with clocking is to make explicit the hegemony of cis-normativity, an ideological construction that sets the grammar for reading bodies through a "hierarchy of verisimilitude" (Malatino 2020, 40). This act of seeing foregrounds the mundane ways we are interpellated as trans through the complex cis-norms of body, beauty, and naturalness. What I am calling cis-normativity refers to a set of moral-ontological premises about subjectivity that center on sex/gender but spill out onto race, ability, and class. It also includes aesthetic norms about femme and masc presentation and beauty. When sex/gender are foregrounded, as in Talia Mae Bettcher's account, cis-normativity holds that the truth of one's gender is determined by one's genitalia, with two possible right options: penis = man and vagina/vulva = woman. This "natural attitude" about sex and gender also holds that reconstructed genitals are artificial, and thus less-than natural, less-than good, and maybe even wrong (Bettcher 2007, 49). In the natural attitude —which is socially dominant and institutionalized in norms and policies that sustain sex-segregated spaces—no method of self-identification, adherence to gendered norms, or body modification can make binary trans people real men and women. Reality enforcement is the set of practices responding to that perceived misalignment, and clocking is one such practice.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Clocking is gender recognition. But is it gender recognition "recognition" in the moral sense? Honneth would say no, and would argue that clocking is identification, but falls short of the positive valence of recognition. Given its conceptual proximity to hailing, clocking connotes unfreedom. While being seen, received, and valued under cis-normativity does restrict how trans people may be deemed valuable, clocking both enables and disables freedom, as we will see. The sharp division one might make between clocking (negative) and recognition (affirmative) is hazy.

As a *first* ambivalence of recognition, consider several angles on the action of clocking, presented as analytically separate though likely overlapping in experience. For a trans person to pass is for them to be seen as cis. Indeed, passing is part of the trans-normative trajectory of actualization, where it constitutes the trans person's recognition as cis. However, as Bettcher argues, the ideal of realness is dependent on a natural attitude about sex/gender that is trans antagonistic in that it is founded on the erasure of people who contradict that natural attitude. Thus, if trans recognition is produced by the subject's interpellation through cis norms, this is misrecognition. Though many trans subjects may aim to pass, the terms of passing deliver misrecognition because they are cis-normative terms—terms which, as we saw, include a set of spurious metaphysical assumptions about a body's naturalness and value. On one hand, not being clocked would seem to confirm the trans person's subjectivity more fully than were they clocked, and approximate recognition. On the other hand, passing, *not being clocked,* is misrecognition; consequently, recognition is clocking.

This is equally the case in settings where inclusion is the explicit aim. Consider the practice of sharing pronouns in a classroom or a meeting. While the act of sharing pronouns is, in one way, trans-inclusive, it may also be underpinned by cis-normative perception. Sometimes pronoun sharing happens for the sake of the trans person in the room who has been or might shortly be clocked. Having to share pronouns not only references, but also threatens to sustain, cis-normativity. Thus, sharing pronouns may in fact *stall* gender euphoria. This is not to say the motivation behind the pronoun go-round is malicious; rather, one might be motivated to *ensure* recognition of a trans person *as trans,* rather than permit the clear misrecognition of misgendering. Yet, given cis-normativity as a structure of perceiving people and bodies, such recognition amounts to clocking, here misrecognition. Similarly, receiving healthcare can be contingent on misrecognition in which we willingly participate. We are often required to self-narrativize our desires and identity in a legitimated, recognizably trans fashion to secure the access to medical technologies required for our (often open-ended) processes of becoming. This may require us to read our pasts through "the tranny childhood lens" (Spade 2006, 320), and strategically take up other concepts that are foreign or mismatched to our lived experience. That is, there is a certain demand to be clocked to secure what we need. Despite the way these terms of recognition hurt us, we have recognized how they can help us. The terms are to some degree injurious, and the endpoint is ambivalent.

Finally, trans resistance to cis-normativity can produce clocking *as* recognition. Some trans people do not wish to pass undetected. In that case, being clocked may attest to one's intentional failure to align oneself with cis-normativity. This is a nuance passed over if *passing* is assumed to be the culmination of trans experience. To the extent that being trans is detachable from any desire to be recognized as women or men, then being clocked can, in fact, be the point. Passing is off the table; conversely, "passing" is a glaring case of misrecognition as cis. Put differently, within a cis-normative context, recognition is ambivalent because misrecognition (as being seen as an error (Howard 2014) or a gender question mark) is desired. This seemingly contradictory result is the

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

product of the persistence of cis-normativity and varying levels of challenge from alternative normativities.

To summarize the upshots of this first ambivalence of trans recognition: to be clocked is to be seen as trans, which is, hegemonically, a seeing and evaluation tethered to cis-normativity. Reducing the space between recognition and misrecognition—between "affirming" and "clocking"—underscores that all being seen as trans, under conditions of trans minoritization and antagonism, is binding even as it enables, differentially, some freedom. It cannot be trusted. Should we accept this view, we must conclude that cis-normativity mars gender recognition in not only uncertainty, but also inefficacy. Focusing on clocking as recognition makes explicit the implicit fact that realness, a seamless slipping into the "natural" cisgender moral order, hangs over gender recognition (see Malatino 2020, 38).

Leaving the first ambivalence there, however, de-emphasizes the resignifiability of clocking, or how trans people work within conditions where clocking is a common practice and a gateway to becoming a subject. The aim of passing, not being clocked, far from exhaustively determines how trans people present themselves in and navigate the world. This is why clocking can be a trans-queer praxis of finding allies and friends by spotting trans-coded patterns and narratives, underpinned by a resistance to cis-normativity. That is, clocking can stand in for recognition, without adopting or endorsing the aim of passing. To repeat an insight from C. Riley Snorton (2008), trans people may reimagine passing by accepting the *process* of how they pass to themselves psychically, even if this psychic passing is consistently at risk of being ungrounded by naturalness as realness or is defined in contradistinguishing oneself from naturalness as realness. The point still stands: recognition is clocking, and clocking is recognition.[4]

A reader may still wonder how visibility relates to recognition. In short, recognition as affirmation of one's subjectivity "passes through" being seen and "read" through gender norms, or clocking. One's "evaluative qualities," which anchor one's moral existence, are never received directly. They are always mediated through a structure of recognizability, or the general conditions under which life is apprehended that would allow for a "quality or potential" of individual human beings to then be "recognized" (Butler 2009, 5). Recognizability is internal to recognition for it concerns how life can appear as life, before it can be affirmed as free or agentic (Butler 2021a, 63). Cis-normativity is, following reality enforcement, a primary structure of recognizability. One's "evaluative qualities" are not detachable from visual norms, including gender norms, which constitute and reflect social norms. The visual realm is not simply one of recognition's fields of play; it is *essential* to the recognition of embodied beings (Butler 2005). That visibility is under-addressed in frameworks that focus on the bestowal of normative status or authority on the other in the service of social freedom reflects a false omission of the materiality of moral life.[5] Contra Honneth, the "cognitive" recognition—where "groups of people are cognitively identified as possessing such and such stable properties and exhibiting such and such sets of behavior"—and "normative" recognition—where "each of these groups is then recognized as deserving a certain normative status"—are actually interdependent (Honneth 2021a, 27). Recognition includes the materiality of recognition—the body that is being perceived of the self who is recognized.

When the terms of recognition find their most violent expression, gender recognition is hypervisibility, a *second* ambivalence. While we want to be seen, especially for who we are, being seen *for who we are* may invite violence. To be sure, not all clocking leads to bodily harm. By no means can the precarity and particular vulnerability

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experienced by poor trans people and trans people of color widely characterize trans vulnerability to violence in general. Yet a complete picture of the violences and abuses stemming from trans antagonism must grasp the multiple vulnerabilities of trans embodiment. To properly understand hypervisibility, cis-normativity must be resituated to prevent conceiving of gender as if it can be separated from race and ability. In fact, the gendering of subjects and their maltreatment on the basis of gender is inextricably bound with both race and ability. This point can be made genealogically or historically, through the claim that binary gender is not simply heterosexist, but also anti-black and colonial due to the co-production of colonial men and women, black slaves as chattel, and Indigenous people of the Americas as impediments to what would become settler colonialism (Spillers 1987; Lugones 2007; Snorton 2017; Stanley 2021).[6] Being recognized as gendered exceeds gender, given the co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing construction of race as a marker of humanity and binary gender.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as *gender* recognition, or that it is only ambivalent for racialized and/or disabled subjects. Rather, gender recognition, or clocking, occurs differentially and reproduces subjectivities in ways beyond the avowed gender binary or other categorizations that upend this binary. To use Bettcher's concept, reality enforcement enforces along different vectors and projects of power. This means that the ambivalences of clocking will be differently expressed, and their negative consequences reduced, because whiteness, wealth, and ability optimize the provision of the cultural and material goods that recognition is thought to provide.

Representation in media constitutes the primary social-cultural act of recognition on offer today for trans people and, arguably, minoritized subjects and communities in general. This is reflected in debates concerning the merits of media representation for increasing the social standing and reducing the stigmatization of trans people. However, for racialized, disabled, and poor people, those "already on the edges of vitality," being brought into the "field of visibility" carries the threat of violence and elimination (Stanley 2021, 86). This is what CeCe McDonald articulates as the paradox of hypervisibility: "With the height of trans visibility has also come the height of trans violence and murder" (McDonald et al. 2017, 26). The so-called "transgender tipping point" of 2014, which heralded the explosion of trans and gender nonconforming celebrities and media figures, introduced greater precarity for black and racialized trans femmes that endures to this day. In fact, this vulnerability to violence is so great that ambivalence begins to break down and gives way to misrecognition through and through.

Cultural visibility is touted as a solution to hypervisibility, when it seems, instead, to be its cause. But why? Why do images of trans people fail to produce the psychic change from antagonism to attachment that might spur cis concern and care, or the goods that recognition supposedly provides? The *longue durée* of trans hypervisibility is sustained by what Eric A. Stanley and others have elsewhere described as the trap-like structure of visual representation (Tourmaline et al. 2017, xv). This trap-like structure constitutes a *third* ambivalence *of recognition,* lying in the psychic structure of viewing, specifically the fetishistic structure of representing racial and gender differences. What is and isn't depicted or seen—this is the process of expelling and reintegrating difference from subjectivity, in the fetishistic structure as Stanley glosses it. To become subjective differences, what we know afterwards as (a person's) race and gender are first displaced —constructed through disavowal—and then reclaimed *as* race and gender, in order to

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be affirmed as "other." These are symbols of otherness to be reincorporated through inclusion and representation.

As I interpret Stanley's argument, the first fetishistic displacement is the creation of race and gender *difference* through racializing and colonial power, which conceals universalism: the secret that we are not *actually* different. More specifically, race and gender conceal the loss of our possibilities to be otherwise,[7] and reify subjectivity. The represented image of racialized trans life is a second displacement, which replaces the melancholic loss of the possibility to be otherwise with the pleasure in not being trans. In sum, a person who views and tolerates trans representation without identifying with that image (and takes pleasure in not being trans) also disavows a (self-)hateful desire to be otherwise. Consequently, the image of difference is not itself hateful, nor does representation open up a free embrace of "otherness." I take this to be the psychic ambivalence involved in representing difference.[8] This ambivalence pertains to acts of representation in the melancholic viewership of a culture where the trans body is representable *because* it has something to divulge, and what it divulges is that it is different.

To illustrate with something more concrete: even filmic records of anti-trans violence, which would seem to cement the fact and consequences of trans antagonism and lead to the legal and social condemnation of transphobic violence, have problematic afterlives (Stanley 2021, 67–87). On one hand, providing such proof seems to be the only way a hermeneutically and epistemically disadvantaged speaker can support their testimony of oppression. On the other hand, there is a disturbing magnetism possessed by these records, a magnetism that does not widely produce care or concern but does produce fascination and obsession. The fetishistic structure of viewing explains this in the co-presence of the pleasure resultant from disidentifying with trans (as a target of violence) and the desire to be otherwise, evidenced by the magnetism of these records. Moreover, as the present precariousness of legal and social protections for trans people confirms, greater qualitative and quantitative knowledge of trans life has not led to less misinformation about trans people and their needs, nor provided the means for trans survival, let alone flourishing. It has prompted direct attack, including, but not limited to, today's rise in anti-trans legislation.

## 2. Recognition's normative ambivalence

I will now bring these ambivalences into direct discussion with Axel Honneth's theory of recognition.[9] While far from being the only theory of recognition, Honneth's theory is a touchstone in the literature that has been deployed in feminist critique, by the author himself, and beyond. I first sketch the contours of Honneth's theory, but my focus is primarily on some lesser-known texts where Honneth considers pathologies relating to recognition: normalization and ideology. I assess these for whether they capture the ambivalence of recognition practices that we see in clocking and trans visibility.

It is first important to understand why recognition is a good and emancipatory norm in his view. Using a psychological model of self-realization in an ethical community, Axel Honneth articulates the Hegelian idea that freedom arises in a dyadic/communal reciprocal granting of normative authority. The process of recognition is an affirmative perception of an other's real value or "evaluative qualities" (Honneth 2002), which supports their standing as "a fully-fledged, equal member in view of [a social] order's established standards" (Honneth 2021b, 577). History progresses via groups' struggles for recognition under recalcitrant conditions. This struggle is rational

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

because it seeks to fulfill the "imperative of mutual recognition" which is required to "develop a practical relation-to-self" (Honneth 1996, 92).

Recognition is here a psychological need made evident by the experience of moral injury, as in the suffering of torture, the denial of equal rights, or the denigration of a culture (Honneth 1996, 133–34). These negative experiences show that "one's own person is constitutively dependent on the recognition of others" (1996, 138) and motivate "social discontent and resistance" (Honneth 2002, 125). Recognition fulfills self-realization, beginning in the family as a child develops into an individual with specific needs and desires, to the experience of moral and legal respect as a subject of legal rights, and extending into social solidarity as they fulfill a social role specific to their talents and abilities. These three forms of recognition—love, respect, and esteem—are required for the realization of autonomy defined as the capacity to lead one's own life and social freedom, or the "internal connection between the openness and freedom of one's inner life and the openness and freedom of one's social context" (Anderson and Honneth 2005, 135).

For Honneth, recognition is emancipatory. While cis-normative gender recognition hinders freedom, the impulse to change these terms, which is fueled by the injurious aspect of clocking, could seem to suggest that Honneth is correct at least insofar as recognition is a foundational norm for liberation. Thus, it could seem that the ambivalences I have identified have gone some way to clarify the radical depths of trans misrecognition but have not unsettled the position that recognition is what we (ought to) want. They are merely ambivalent *effects* of recognition (see McQueen 2015). Furthermore, since Honneth emphasizes the endless struggle required to update the meaning of mutual recognition—specifically, the new subjective qualities that are affirmed—it may appear that his theory could supply a normative framework for diagnosing trans recognition failures. It could be that Honneth's theory can clarify the rational and progressive dimensions of trans struggle. This effort, I suggest, might only succeed after first evaluating the resources within Honneth's framework to grasp recognition's ambivalent effects, and evaluating whether these ambivalent effects ought to bear on the emancipatory potential of recognition as a norm given Honneth's own commitments. This is my task, and if my argument succeeds, it will be a boon to trans theories of justice and subjectivity that resist or decenter the pursuit of recognition (Bey 2017; Stanley 2021; Bey 2022).

Appreciating how recognition can produce bad effects, Honneth has considered the possibility that recognition secures social domination. A first effort at exploring this issue results in the concept of *normalizing recognition*, in which a person is positively valued, but this value is experienced as a restriction of autonomy, specifically because it is an anachronistic reason for being recognized. Honneth's example is a woman esteemed as a good housewife. She will have "little reason to identify with this value-statement to such a degree that she could regard her own feeling of self-worth as having been thereby reinforced" (2007, 338–39). This is because a woman's place in a traditional family structure is thought to be evaluatively passé, irrelevant as a source of women's (feminist) empowerment now. To the worry that normalization presents an ambivalent kind of recognition, Honneth neatly responds that it is not really recognition at all, because it fails to provide the recognized with *relevant reasons* to feel self-esteem. Normalizing recognition is only misrecognition, a poor imitation. Affirmative and non-normalizing recognition is preserved.

Normalizing recognition does not bear on the "core" of recognition largely thanks to the way normalization is conceived. The trouble is this is a poor way to understand

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

normalization. Let's consider this in light of clocking/passing. Honneth might appeal to normalizing recognition to argue, in analogy with the housewife, that passing is not a wholly rational basis of trans self-worth. This position aligns with a version of the trans-normativity critique, where it is a bit passé to want to pass. However, both feminist and trans cases are dubious. Honneth has slipped in the assumption that feminism and tradition are irreconcilable, which is profoundly challenged by decolonial feminists (Khader 2018, 76–98). Similarly, we should certainly not assume, abstracted from a particular context and actor, that the desire to pass falls below the rational standards of trans emancipation. This is in part because it is methodologically important, in trans critique, to grant normative priority on the suffering caused by cis-normativity, without necessarily assuming that there is a single theory of transition and gender identity (even just in a particular social organization and epoch) that would exhaustively determine the rational bases of self-worth.

Furthermore, feminists have argued that normalization is not just "external" to a subject, but constitutive of them (Heyes 2007). Processes of normalization create subjects. This premise is confirmed by gender identity wherein compulsory (cis) gendering inaugurates and possibilizes our being subjects, and not the other way around. Faced with this view, our self-concepts and attachments to the normal merit critique insofar as they may constrain our freedom; but this critique requires careful evaluation for how resistance is practiced. There are trans people who develop positive self-relations when they pass, even as they do *not* hold the natural attitude about sex/gender. In these cases, as I have hoped to show, recognition is more ambivalent and uncertain than what Honneth can suggest.

Honneth's second effort considers the view, attributed to Althusser, that the affirmative function of recognition entrenches a dominating social structure and serves as ideology. Public esteem appears to "create and maintain an individual self-conception that is seamlessly integrated into a system based on the prevailing division of labor" (Honneth 2007, 325). *Ideological recognition*, Honneth argues, meets the normative criteria of non-ideological recognition, but cannot fulfill its promise materially. In an analogy to speech acts, conferring esteem to a group with values which persons in that group can espouse is ideological if the evaluative promise does not actualize in a material effect. The prime case is the recognition of workers as entrepreneurs/self-employed, who are then expected to work with independence and zeal as if the corporate project were entirely their own. Since this positive talk does not materialize in disruptions of corporate hierarchy, it is ideological recognition. This corporate recognition cultivates positive self-relations that are unrooted in real social practices, thereby thwarting the change promised.[10]

In sum, recognition is ideological when positive valuation does not translate to changes in practices and social organization that reflect this new standing granted to the recognized and the transformation of the relationship between recognizer and recognized. With some defense, the paradox of hypervisibility fits this description and, with the trap-like structure of representation, challenges the possibility that the social transformation promised by representation will materialize.[11] What must be clarified is that cultural representation is not socially inert; it is a practice of recognition, for it (i) "[gives] positive expression to the value … group of subjects," (Honneth 2007, 337), (ii) offers value-statements with which the recognized can identify, and (iii) delivers "contrastive" judgments that allow the recognized to "feel distinguished in some special way" (339–40). And yet, as *positive* cultural representation of trans people in mainstream media rises, so do acts of legal antagonism and violence. This does not

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prevent the wide utilization of and praise for increased representation.[12] Furthermore, if representation of trans people is particularly magnetic and spectacular because it is sparks a psychic ambivalence, then we cannot be certain that the "material effects" of recognition are delayed, and only shortly to come.

Having used Honneth's own resources to situate the ambivalences introduced in the first section, we must now turn to the issue of normative ambivalence. Despite exposing the ways that recognition processes can enshrine domination and normalization, Honneth does not conclude that recognition (as a norm) is ambivalent (see Honneth 2021a, 24–25). While he was able to discount normalization as misrecognition, I am not sure that ideological recognition can be similarly discounted. This is because, on Honneth's own concepts, ideological recognition *actually fulfills* the function of recognition that Honneth expounds. Just how far should Honneth defend the affirmative concept of recognition whilst astutely noting its bad, dominating forms? Does this turn on determining how much "actuality" moves a norm from ideal to something less-than-ideal?

This is not the right question to ask, following Honneth's recent comments on his metanormative picture. Defending his method against the charges that it is a merely descriptive and not normative account and that recognition ought to be supplemented with a proper ideal theory, Honneth (2021b) explains that his model of normative theory is immanent in this specific way: society's social relations (practices of recognition) contain principles of recognition which are not only historically justified, but which also serve as correct standards for evaluating that society's historical progress. Recognition principles are either fully realized in given institutions, semantic-symbolic environments, and mentalities, and point towards future fulfillment; or they are deficiently realized and serve to identify misrecognition or limitations of freedom in the present. Actual misrecognition—more to the point, failed recognition—can only represent a failure to appropriately implement the correct "institutional measures" that would realize the norm or the failure to establish the "routinised behaviours" that would instantiate it (2021b, 577). Honneth takes himself to transcend the ideal/non-ideal divide because these standards are "institutionalised" in "continually self-transforming actuality" (578). The *correctness* of said institutional standards is justified by a particular rendering of historical teleology, namely that a population's active support of current social institutions indicates that they are the most progressive there have been (2013, 59).[13] I will treat myself to a very limited critique[14] of this view, appropriate to my argument: the very concept of ideological recognition vitiates this measure. Collective endorsement and participation in a recognitive practice do not indicate that it enables freedom. It may just as well enable domination.

I can now clarify the normative ambivalence of recognition, the view that recognition contains both emancipatory and oppressive aspects. We may want to follow Honneth in utilizing recognition as an immanent standard for social critique. This entails identifying "recognitive relations in which members of society stand to one another" as productive of social standards that are the object of theorizing about social justice (2021b, 577). But it also entails appreciating the ambivalence within these given relations. I do not think the "normative surplus" of a norm—that is, the unrealized potential of a norm—is necessarily eviscerated by this more ambivalent approach, but I do think this approach necessitates a move away from recognition monism. In other words, a more complex social theory must be supplied to observe the interaction of plural (ambivalent) norms espoused in distinct spheres of life—where these norms may have surplus that is unrealized, but this surplus is observed particularly in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

*interaction* of norms and their respective practices. This approach has been developed by Nancy Fraser (2013, 2014) and Rocío Zambrana (2013, 2015, 2017, 2018), who explain that normative ambivalence results from the functional interdependence of interpenetrating spheres of life. Although I cannot here delve into these rich frameworks, views like theirs enable us to appreciate the ambivalence of gender recognition as stemming from the functional interdependence of gender normativities with other social reproductive normativities of economy, race, and ability.

It is relevant to note that, while Honneth considers gender relations, he never considers *gendering* except in a brief dialogue (2021a) with Butler. This is because he considers recognition only with regard to the development of non-alienated self-realization and not the constitution of the subject, as Butler does. There, he spells out an analytical divide between the naturalization of the gender binary (an operation of "cognitive" recognition) and discrimination/maltreatment on the basis of gender (a distorted operation of "normative" misrecognition). To avoid giving the impression that recognition is a (dehistoricized) ideal, I suggest that Honneth consider more carefully how "seeing" is also a materialization of recognition, for naturalization and sedimentation are never normatively empty processes. As I hope to have shown, this conceptual division between cognitive and normative recognition is dubious because "cognitive" recognition proceeds upon premises about the rightness of bodies, gender ideals, and race- and disability-based prejudice, and tracking the effects of the normative judgments implicitly at work requires careful, contextual interpretation. Trans critique and praxis require the revision, with flexible concepts, of gendered forms—including emergent gender identities—and the livability they do (not) offer. Recognition is neither a blueprint for trans emancipation, nor a norm that should be abandoned. It cannot be known, in advance of the crystallization of trans antagonism and resistance, that recognition is what we want, or a sign of progress.

## 3. Trans recognition: Where? When? Who? How?

Rather than offer a *theory* of recognition which sets forth its value for all trans people cross-contextually, we should look to the common features of trans recognitive acts that are deemed at least partially successful by the recognized. From this, we may sketch in outline *trans recognitive practices*. Refusing to provide a trans theory of recognition aids in avoiding the closure of a normative sphere that is structured by ambivalence. Deflating recognition to acts within community-specific practices illuminates the actions, values, and textures of such acts using ideas and concepts the participants already to a degree endorse and understand, consequently producing analyses that are easily translatable to practical reason and praxis.

A social practice is a pattern of learned behavior that coordinates action regarding social resources, "due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas" (Haslanger 2018, 245). A recognitive practice typically concerns social esteem, acceptance, and affirmation as resources that sustain the intelligibility of social subjects—although not necessarily without ambivalence, as I have just argued. Although it is commonplace to discuss gender recognition as the recognizer's recognition of a recognized's gender, following my arguments in §1, this is clocking. The first distinction is that trans recognitive practices need not be clocking; in fact, their aims may diverge from the identification of a subject's gender. This is to say, trans recognitive practices are not so much recognition of gender as recognition of subjectivity as a whole and its creative powers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Trans recognitive practices are those that provide a better entry into and affirmation of subjecthood than cis-normativity.[15] Without suggesting that there are pure escapes from cis-normative grammars and forms, we must account for trans forms of life sustained by social practices that claim to challenge white cis-normativity, or trans *resocialization* (Dickinson 2021). In what follows, I discuss embodied poetics as trans recognitive practice. Although embodied poetics departs significantly from recognition as it is typically construed, we will see that this practice retains recognition's core connection to relational agency because it enables the development of public personas and relational capacities required for exercising normative authority in a specific community.[16] Especially as Stryker describes it, embodied poetics is highly grounded in the actual spatial and historical development of social relations. This resonates with Honneth's original impulse (1996) to move away from Hegel's idealized, de-historicized relations of recognition.

Following Susan Stryker, understanding trans recognition begins by considering how it is that transitions (and other processes of subjectivity's formation) happen between concrete bodies, in concrete places. Stryker (2008) offers an illustration of the psychic and social work trans recognition can perform in her writing on the poetics of transsexual sadomasochism. It begins with materiality and geography in her attachment of bodily recognition with the spaces (and creation of those spaces) that make such acts possible. Reflecting on a San Francisco BDSM community running out of the House of the Golden Bull at the height of the AIDS pandemic, Stryker's work on the S/M dungeon presents a practice of recognition as an embodied poetics, by which she means the artistic, relational creation of bodies and embodiment.

Stryker's *where-when* is the Mission district, incarnated as a place of social deviance and stigma, against the temporal-spatial background of colonialism that gives the area its name. The dungeon is framed geographically by housing projects, an art gallery, a tattoo shop, and a café/venue for queer and trans artists. The S/M party she attends is in the upstairs of a Victorian house, signaling the mythic quality of the so-called underground. Where-when are multiply determined by the theft of land, the vicissitudes of capital, and the undersided production of the social world(s). It is Stryker's reflection on the geographical and temporal facets of her experience, more so than the details themselves, that bears on the concept of trans recognition. As a theory of recognition, Stryker's method is illuminating in its detailed record of the city/neighborhood, which functions dually to signify recognition as a topic of historical research and to bring to light the forced and coerced exchanges of land and (life)time in the development of her conditions of habitability. This suggests that trans recognitive practices could be marked by a prolonged engagement of the co-evolution of one's personal history as a recognizer/recognized with geopolitical histories. We ought to regard physical space, for gathering and for the cultivation of embodied action and expression, as a resource that is coordinated in practices of trans/t4t recognition.

Stryker's *who* is defined neither by gender nor sexuality. Her recognition is the work of those who uphold and contribute to the customs of "old leather" through the 1990s' blossoming of gender play, including a person who would come to be her playmate, academic colleague, and friend years on. It is not t4t, nor queer. The who shares space, time, and pastimes with artists, drug users, sex workers. This suggests that trans recognition need not be by "us" for it to be for "us," but also that it must be resolutely *local*—by those who find themselves knotted in the relevant place/space. Moreover, although esteem may be a resource coordinated in such recognitive practices, Stryker's example suggests that this would not presuppose a zero-sum distribution. In

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other words, due to the sociological fact that queer and trans communities are stigmatized alongside other deviant groups, trans/t4t recognitive practices may produce community membership not itself premised on stigmatization or the creation of deviance. Rather than make a claim about "trans values," we ought to appreciate that trans recognitive practices may emerge from creative and sexual practices, and thus form practice-dependent, contingent solidarities between people with widely ranging values. Thus, the resources at play in acts of recognition should be accessed by the study of contingent social formations, for they are relatively underdetermined by theories of recognition that exhaust such resources with concepts of social status in abstraction from social histories.

The *how* stands out in its departure from ontology and questions about the (pre-) existence of the values we perceive in or ascribe to others, and move towards sensation, action, and corporeality. Although the affirmation of her womanness (or absence thereof) surely matters to Strkyer to the extent that cis-normativity partly determines subjectivity, the dungeon space permits recognition that does not serve that purpose. The dungeon space brings Stryker into being, not so much ontologically, but by inscribing within her sensory experience the possibility of new being, poetic possibility. An intermeshment of corporeal textures creates a body Stryker can inhabit outside the space, in the broader world. Stryker did not so much decide to be trans in space as experience the expansion of her own agency through an affective and physical connection to others—the "shared pattern of motion" of flogging and other S/M acts (41). She envisions her "body as a meeting point, a node, where external lines of force and social determination thicken into meat and circulate as movement back into the world" (42). While accepting her radical dependence on other sources of power in her constitution, including those who may or may not recognize her, she experiences her body as a "place of agency" (42). This "laboratory" (38) cultivated relationality that disrupted liberal notions of identity and the subject. We should understand this laboratory as a place of critique, though not because dissolving liberal notions of identity is, in and of itself, liberatory practice. It develops, for Stryker, a new relation to her body and self through a "proprioceptive awareness" (42) that challenged the cis and masculine modes of being Stryker had adopted as second nature.

Recognition presupposes an other's capacity as an authority on one's gender practice; but the how of Stryker's recognition suggests that trans recognition reimagines the recognizer's "authority." Stryker's agnosticism as to the "source" or psychic scaffolding by which the forms of address and vulnerable communication between bodies felt "right" dissolves the specter of essentialism, or gender identity as an internal truth, that hangs over recognition as it is commonly conceived. Nevertheless, her longing to be addressed as "she" is real, in the Lacanian sense of "the *place* that is always returned to" (2008, 42, my emphasis). It is a longing satisfied and sustained by the technologies of the dungeon, which produce "(trans)gendered embodiment, a mechanism for dismembering and disarticulating received patterns of identification, affect, sensation and appearance, and for reconfiguring, coordinating and remapping them in bodily space" (43). When trans recognition and its politics center exclusively on the authority of gender *ascription*, they miss that recognition concerns stepping into "the structure of another's desire" (43).

A trans recognitive practice should not, following Stryker's account, concern identification or authenticity, but rather desiring and being desired. To step a bit beyond the dungeon, we might say that becoming a subject lies in how we can be desired in love, sex, friendship, camaraderie, and the existential support that such desire offers. The

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dungeon also instructs that such desire requires learning about others and/through ourselves, ourselves and/through others. As much as it is a space for experimentation, the dungeon laboratory teaches, and fosters the creation of, new ways of perceiving and attending to persons and their neediness. In moral language, we might call this retooling moral perception and value attunement, or the transvaluation of values by linguistic and bodily resignification. As we describe these valuational processes, we ought not lose sight of how trans/t4t recognitive practices function to build socialities, for the *how* incorporates and exceeds values.

While we should adopt, from Stryker, a model of recognitive practices as about possibilizing rather than identifying, it is incumbent upon us to probe the racism, classism, and ableism that open up poetic possibility and impossibility. Becoming a subject and surviving under conditions of hypervisibility requires the craftiness that allows one to transform misrecognition into recognition, as one can. Darlene Clark Hine's black feminist concept of dissemblance refers to this craftiness, which V Varun Chaudhry (2020) extends in their reflections on the tactics of black trans women for navigating anti-black and anti-trans welfare and medical infrastructures. Strategic dissemblance is a tactic for securing their needs by crafting an outer appearance of disclosure to shield and retain some privacy and sovereignty over their inner lives. Black trans women and trans women of color in need have learned to take on personas that display brute emotionality and sheer vulnerability in the trick of performing precariousness—sobbing on the floor of the local shelter, begging for necessary resources—to avoid being swallowed up by the precarity that structures their lives (529).

We have seen that, in shifting to acts of embodied poetics as opposed to identification and evaluation of a body/person, trans/t4t recognitive practices concern the coordination of desire and desire-based affirmation to sustain the *reinvention and recreation* of social subjects. Poesis "collapses the boundary between the embodied self, its world and others, allowing one to interpenetrate the others and thereby constitute a specific place" (Stryker 2008, 39). Yet, we have seen that boundary collapse, or porosity, produces profoundly ambivalent results. There is nothing inherently or necessarily good about interpenetration and the vulnerability that it presupposes. Stryker seems to acknowledge this, and instead emphasizes fidelity to "a movement that becomes generative as it encloses and invests in a new space, through a perpetually reiterative process of growing new boundaries and shedding abandoned materialities" (45). As a strategic performance, dissemblance underscores the ambivalence of adopting transphobic and racist injurious terms to refuse them in the service of greater possibility. Its distance from authenticity reflects the normative and creative constraints at the intersection of trans and racial clocking, as well as the creation of possibility from within these same constraints. Dissemblance is a trans recognitive practice that clearly subverts recognition-as-identification from within the black trans antinomy of needing to be seen and to be hidden to survive. This, all while being able to take a certain joy in the craftiness, praise each others' creativity, and laugh about it all together (Chaudhry 2020, 529). Trans recognitive practices are ultimately ambivalent to the core. Which materialities, places, and boundaries fit best is a further matter of investigation, deliberation, and critique.

## 4. Practices and places of critique

To retrace our steps: in the first section, I presented three ways that clocking, or gender identification, is both successful and failed, and hence partial recognition at best. In the

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

second section, I supported the thesis that recognition is an ambivalent norm through an evaluation of Honneth's discussion of normalization and ideology. In the third section, I shifted away from theorizing recognition as a value and towards conceptualizing recognition as a (necessarily geographically and temporally bounded) practice. Reading Stryker's account of embodied poetics as an answer to the question of what trans recognitive practices might be, I suggested that (i) space/place is a distinct resource in such practices, (ii) the recognizers and recognized are in solidary relations which shape how esteem is distributed, and (iii) at least some trans recognitive practices do not ascribe value or identify, but rather sustain the embodied reinvention or recreation of subjectivity—an embodied *doing* which exceeds supporting or articulating particular values.

I end with some considerations of the reverberations of my arguments for social critique. First, it must be underscored that trans recognitive practices are sources of social critique, even if they are ambivalent. In other words, trans recognitive practices do not simply describe how trans people see and receive each other, but also constitute *critique* of how recognition rolls out when strongly attached to cis-normativity. Trans recognitive practices put cis recognitive practices in their place as *but one* type of recognizing. Further, trans recognitive practices are an *immanent* perspective on the shared lifeworld, albeit one grounded in localized attunements to places, relationships, reasons, and values that differ from cis-normative attunements. Trans perspectives are both critical of and immanent to cis perspectives. To be clear, however, trans perspectives are heterogeneous across socialities, and what may count as a "trans perspective" can be determined only in relation to the social boundaries at play.

The critical power of trans practices does not come from the supposition that they are enlivened by different or new values or ways of being. It is the *internal connection of reflexivity and recognition* which makes recognitive practices potentially critical. The force of grasping one's norms *as one's own* and thereby how they stand in relation to other norms is the locus of critique (Bertram and Celikates 2015, 847). As a minoritized set of value attunements and practical orientations to matter, lifeworld, and bodies, trans recognitive practices are structurally compelled into a position of potential reflexivity—quotidian violence elicits trans people, as participants in these practices, to call themselves into question. Reflexive criticism comes to fruition when localized attunements to values are paired with epistemic humility, or a keen sensitivity to the sustained burden of ongoing reflexivity.

This is to say that there is no need to evaluate the recognitive perspective through another "critical social" perspective, or validate a trans recognitive perspective from a transhistorical measure of critique. A trans recognitive perspective can be critical of society and social forms, provided ongoing reflexive criticism (Congdon 2020, 596). The theorization of trans recognitive practices in trans critique is social critique if this theorization is ready to scrutinize the social whole and itself as a part of that social whole, even if it prioritizes the terrain of contesting naturalized binary gender. Concretely, a reflexive criticism of a particular community's practice of recognition could involve examining it in the matrix of other commitments/values and practices of the community, particularly those related to or interacting with recognitive practices (McDowell 1998, 36–38, 188–91). It could alternatively take the form of investigating and questioning the power relations in the genesis of the practice in question (Freyenhagen 2013, 265).[17]

Although I cannot here argue for or against the merits and limits of recognition by the state and social institutions as a goal of trans struggle, my above arguments support turning our attention to local recognitive practices, rather than investigating the value of

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recognition for "all trans people" without regard to the distinct communities that would participate in these practices. Thus, a second conclusion is that, to the extent that recognition serves to guide trans struggle, the focus should be enabling the creation and development of diverse recognitive practices. This would entail identifying the resources of such practices and their distribution. Any analysis should guard against generalizing the makeup of trans recognitive practices beyond reasonable limits, that is, in a way that is insensitive to the histories and lifeworlds of social actors. Having said that, my argument drew out the role of space/place as a distinct resource of trans recognitive practices. I would argue that space/place is a core resource for recognitive practices in general, albeit one rarely treated as such. Concretely, this means that "chatter" over who gets to be where, what spaces and places mean to us, and those we seek to build, is ostensibly recognition talk—not simply because questions of spaces imply questions of community membership, but also because spaces and places contain the (built and symbolic) architecture for whether and how we are recognized.[18] Moreover, attention to space/place as a resource for recognitive practices foregrounds a node of potential solidarity with decolonial/anti-settler-colonial and anti-racist movements, where recognition is empty if it does not consist in the equitable redistribution of land, particularly given the relationship between land, political power, and economic resources (see Coulthard 2014).

Third, it is incumbent upon trans critique to perform contextual assessments of which acts and norms are emancipatory, and which are not. Embracing the ambivalence of normativity, specifically the potential for any value to be resignified in projects that deepen oppression, furthers our critical capacities. In short, we must be open to the goodness and badness of recognition, used as a norm and instantiated in acts, to make us better at assessing how and where/when a demand or desire for recognition should guide trans struggle, and how and where/when recognitive acts succeed more or less.[19] This evaluation does not presuppose a positive concept of recognition—that is, one that is not ambivalent. All that is required is continued critical attention to how things can go wrong. This presupposes the recognized's access to the bad, by which I mean, their capacity to feel bad about the way they are recognized, while also appreciating that being recognized is both a condition of and problem for their activity and self-development. It also presupposes the capacity of those who participate in recognitive practices to holistically reflect on their resources and aims in light of suffering.

Activists and theorists of trans emancipatory struggles do not, or cannot afford to, abandon temporary tactical alignment with market forces and the state-based social protection, legal protection, and legal recognition. Those who resist bureaucracy and administration's gendering force (Spade 2015) can and should (with self-consistency) insist on easier access to gender markers and identification changes that quite literally save lives. In my view, such alignment arises from the attunement to and normative priority on the needs of trans people, with the understanding that trans needs are heterogeneous, contested, and underexplored.[20] Recognizing the ambivalence of recognition enables us to continually critique its iterations, and to judge whether recognition is an improvement to social wrongs in each case. In the continued critique of recognition lies its promise.

**Acknowledgments.** Special thanks to three anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments. I am indebted to Amy Allen, Sarah Clark Miller, John Christman, Benjamin Randolph, and Jerome Clarke for their comments and feedback which fueled the development of this paper. Thank you also to the audience of Thinking Trans // Trans Thinking at Goucher College.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

## Notes

1 While some degree of self- and social acceptance is surely important to trans subjectivity, some observe that mainstream LGBTQIA celebrations mobilize *pride as recognition* to de-historicize and de-politicize trans struggle (Halperin 2009; Halperin and Traub 2009; Gay Shame 2009).

2 The normative importance of recognition is, for Honneth, grounded in the philosophical anthropological claim that "the human form of life as a whole is marked by the fact that individuals can gain social membership and thus a positive relation-to-self only via mutual recognition," with the caveat that what is legitimately recognizable is contingent on what supports social integration (Honneth 2002, 501).

3 My position is closest to Judith Butler's most recent articulation of recognition as always partial (2021b, 34).

4 My account of trans recognition as clocking supports Kristina Lepold's position that the ambivalence of recognition "depends on the particular social norms to which individuals subject themselves" (2021, 148).

5 The recognizer cannot recognize the recognized's distinctive value, and carry this recognition into actions of prioritizing the recognized's ends, without first registering their being visually and sensorially —their embodied being and distinctiveness. This is even more so the case in intimate relationships. As Amy Allen has shown, while familial love is essential for developing subjectivity, it is also ambivalent, for the child's acceptance of this love also requires the child to accept and internalize parental authority before they can critically assess this authority and its expression (2010, 26). Since conveying love and worth is presently inseparable from gender-based ascriptions, a child's positive recognition from their parent can enshrine misrecognition "in a single stroke." Allen's example concerns how parents can inadvertently subject their children to subordinating gender norms, such as traditional femininity, through their love. This is just as relevant for the becoming of trans children, who receive safety, love, and support from their parents packaged with understandings of the child's embodiment that are ultimately detrimental to them. Parental love is often mediated through the natural attitude which bears on the child's self-image as they struggle for gender recognition.

6 From a critical perspective on settler colonialism, gender is ambivalent because the norms of colonial subjectivity are unjust but must be, to some extent, engaged when the recognized is a colonist or espouses colonial norms. Trans and Two-Spirit bodies have experienced great violence through gendering—violence that is met with the resistance of survival. These bodies have also constituted the difference-making margins of racialized-gender/gendered-race. The "mutilation of trans flesh," exemplified in the colonizing and punitive act of "siccing dogs upon Two-Spirit bodies," marks the margins of the diverse, cacophonous, and shifting group of colonial subjects (to be) (Leo 2020, 465). Brooklyn Leo explains that the marginality of trans and Two-Spirit bodies continues in the violent regeneration of the colonial state, metonymized in regular occurrences of "Trans Latinx or Indigenx [people] found dead in a detention center or among the borderlands." Qwo-Li Driskill (2004) describes this in terms of non-sovereignty, or the many ways Two-Spirit people are "stolen from their bodies" in the abuses that constitute white masculinity's operation: the theft of land, body, and spirit.

7 It does not follow that everyone should be and become otherwise. To advocate for this would de-historicize race and gender. I am evoking the inevitable loss following categorization. Whether this loss is a problem, and the kind of problem it may be, depends on the political context.

8 On this psychic ambivalence, see Butler (1997). In their seminal paper on melancholy gender, Butler's footnote positively considers Mandy Merck's suggestion: "if disavowal conditions performativity, then perhaps gender itself might be understood on the model of the fetish" (Butler 1995, 176–77). Stanley seems to be developing something like this line of thought.

9 I haven't addressed here the group of political concepts of recognition espoused by theorists of multiculturalism, such as Will Kymlicka (1996), communitarianism, such as Charles Taylor (1994), or democracy, especially James Tully (2004) and David Owen (2021; Owen and Tully 2007). Furthermore, I have not discussed another theory of recognition, formed in part in response to Honneth, which centers the reciprocal granting of normative authority, but prioritizes the recognition of reason-giving and participation in rational conflict over a thicker picture of the relations needed for self-realization (Bertram and Celikates 2015; Fraser 2003; McQueen 2022). This concept of recognition concerns the process of affirming one's status as an author of normative reasons, rather than the intersubjective process of self-realization. Like Honneth, McQueen (2022) holds that recognition is necessary for the achievement of freedom. Unlike Honneth, McQueen understands freedom as the ability to offer reasons for actions, which can be recognized as

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appropriate by the people to whom one is justifying oneself. Drawing on Robert Pippin's (2008) reading of Hegel, recognition here has two dimensions: recognition of person's status as a free and rational agent and recognition of a person's reasons "as appropriate for the person in question" (99), as fitting "with an agent's practical identity, that is, her core preferences, desires, projects and the like" (97). Recognition does not concern healthy psychological development *per se*, although positive relations to self might facilitate the "ability to answer for oneself," which is autonomy-conferring (104). This latter theory merits further discussion.

**10** This diagnosis develops into *organized self-realization*. Honneth persuasively argues that increased individualization—especially greater differentiation among people in terms of lifestyle, aesthetic, and employment—has not necessarily led to greater autonomy, or the "'inner' fact of the subject's increasing individual achievements" (2012, 154). Specifically, Honneth advances the position that having the possibility of expressing greater personal uniqueness and authenticity has become a *social and institutional expectation.* He writes: "[Claims] to individual self-realization, … have become such a strongly institutionalized pattern of expectations for social reproduction that they have lost their inner *telos* and instead become a basis for legitimizing the system" (157). The result is that the appeal of feeling irreplaceable is "misused for capitalist modernization" because workers are treated as "creative 'entrepreneurs'" who view themselves as self-directed, and view their work both autonomous and an expression of their personal self-realization, when they have in fact absorbed the imperatives and aims of their company and bosses (162–64). Consequently, wanting to be and become "an individual" leads less to satisfaction and more to emotional barrenness and "depression" (164–65).

**11** To those who might think that worker buy-in to entrepreneur ideology is more widespread than trans endorsement of visibility and cultural recognition, I'd reply that workers also see through corporate recognition of their independence and individuality as ploys to entrench the social importance of labor.

**12** To be clear, I am not referring to trans online content creators but rather the crossover of trans figures into mainstream media and the demand for this.

**13** In earlier work, Honneth's conception of progress requires us to judge, from an abstract transhistorical perspective, whether individualization and social inclusion are increasing (2003, 185). I suspect this metaphysically heavier concept is abandoned because its criteria are not immanent enough and it can be charged with the same empty formalism Honneth applies to Rainer Forst (Honneth 2013, 339).

**14** See Freyenhagen (2015) for a critical discussion.

**15** Let it be clear that I do not think that the values and practices instituted by trans people are always oppositional to cis-normativity, or that recognition's ambivalence is a fact, and potential problem, only for cis spaces, values, and practices.

**16** I do not here offer a full defense of embodied poetics as recognition. A full consideration of the topic would require excavating the complete metanormative picture of recognition and/versus poetics in a way that I cannot do here. I thank a reviewer for pressing me on this issue, and lament that I lack the space to give the issue the attention it deserves.

**17** And more! Other models of critique are available that reject a transhistorical measure, such as: "historical and cultural comparisons, … contestation by marginal(ized) groups, and defamiliarization by satire or caricature" (Freyenhagen 2013, 265).

**18** This conclusion could lend support to Nancy Fraser's argument that recognition and redistribution are entwined tactics for addressing forms of subordination, rather than distinct paradigms of justice (2003).

**19** Nikolas Kompridis's (2007) suggestion to lessen the normative and political burden placed on recognition is another helpful expression of recognition's fallibility: "Because we don't fully know what we are doing when we are doing it, and because our motivations and our actions can never be fully transparent to us or fully foreseeable by us, the possibility of misrecognition is built into each and every act of recognition. This possibility is made actual in the practices by which we interpret and apply our current norms of recognition, for better and for worse" (287).

**20** See Currah (2022) for an excellent study of the temporary alignment with the state that is essential to trans survival.

## References

Aizura, Aren. 2017. Introduction. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116 (3): 606–11.
Alabanza, Travis. 2023. *None of the above: Reflections on life beyond the binary*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Allen, Amy. 2010. Recognizing domination: Recognition and power in Honneth's critical theory. *Journal of Power* 3 (1): 21–32.
Anderson, Joel, and Axel Honneth. 2005. Autonomy, vulnerability, recognition, and justice. In *Autonomy and the challenges to liberalism*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Bertram, Georg W., and Robin Celikates. 2015. Towards a conflict theory of recognition: On the constitution of relations of recognition in conflict. *European Journal of Philosophy* 23 (4): 838–61.
Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2007. Evil deceivers and make-believers: On transphobic violence and the politics of illusion. *Hypatia* 22 (3): 43–65.
Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2014. Trapped in the wrong theory: Rethinking trans oppression and resistance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39 (2): 383–406.
Bettcher, Talia Mae. 2019. What is trans philosophy? *Hypatia* 34 (4): 644–67.
Bey, Marquis. 2017. The trans*-ness of blackness, the blackness of trans*-ness. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4 (2): 275–95.
Bey, Marquis. 2022. *Black trans feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Butler, Judith. 1995. Melancholy gender—refused identification. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 5 (2): 165–80.
Butler, Judith. 1997. *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London and New York: Verso.
Butler, Judith. 2021a. Recognition and mediation. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, ed. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press.
Butler, Judith. 2021b. Recognition and the social bond. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, ed. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press.
Chaudhry, V. Varun. 2020. On trans dissemblance: Or, why trans studies needs black feminism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45 (3): 529–35.
Congdon, Matthew. 2020. The struggle for recognition of what? *European Journal of Philosophy* 28 (3): 586–601.
Coulthard, Glen Sean. 2014. *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Currah, Paisley. 2022. *Sex is as sex does: Governing transgender identity*. New York: New York University Press.
Dickinson, Nathaniel. 2021. Seizing the means: Towards a trans epistemology. In *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson, Elle O'Rourke, and Jordy Rosenberg. London: Pluto Press.
Driskill, Qwo-Li. 2004. Stolen from our bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/queers and the journey to a sovereign erotic. *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16 (2): 50–64.
Fraser, Nancy. 2003. Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation. In Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange*. London and New York: Verso.
Fraser, Nancy. 2013. Between marketization and social protection: Resolving the feminist ambivalence. In *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
Fraser, Nancy. 2014. Behind Marx's hidden abode. *New Left Review* 86 (April): 55–72.
Freyenhagen, Fabian. 2013. XIII-ethical (self-)critique. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 113 (3/3): 253–68.
Freyenhagen, Fabian. 2015. Honneth on social pathologies: A critique. *Critical Horizons* 16 (2): 131–52.
Gay Shame. 2009. A virus in the system. https://gayshame.net/.
Halperin, David M. 2009. Why gay shame now? In *Gay Shame*, ed. Valerie Traub. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Halperin, David M., and Valerie Traub. 2009. Beyond gay pride. In *Gay Shame*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Haslanger, Sally. 2018. What is a social practice? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 82 (July): 231–47.
Heyes, Cressida J. 2007. *Self transformations: Foucault, ethics, and normalized bodies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
Honneth, Axel. 1996. *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Honneth, Axel. 2002. Grounding recognition: A rejoinder to critical questions. *Inquiry* 45 (4): 499–519.
Honneth, Axel. 2003. Redistribution as recognition: A response to Nancy Fraser. In *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth. London; New York: Verso.
Honneth, Axel. 2007. Recognition as ideology. In *Recognition and power: Axel Honneth and the tradition of critical social theory*, ed. Bert van den Brink and David Owen. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Honneth, Axel. 2012. *The I in we: Studies in the theory of recognition*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press.
Honneth, Axel. 2013. *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Honneth, Axel. 2021a. Recognition between power and normativity. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, ed. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press.
Honneth, Axel. 2021b. Reply to Darwall. *European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (3): 575–80.
Howard, Yetta. 2014. Error. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (1–2): 82–83.
Johnson, Austin H. 2016. Transnormativity: A new concept and its validation through documentary film about transgender men. *Sociological Inquiry* 86 (4): 465–91.
Juang, Richard M. 2006. Transgendering the politics of recognition. In *The transgender studies reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge.
Khader, Serene J. 2018. *Decolonizing universalism: A transitional feminist ethic*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Kompridis, Nikolas. 2007. Struggling over the meaning of recognition: A matter of identity, justice, or freedom? *European Journal of Political Theory* 6 (3): 277–89.
Kymlicka, Will. 1996. *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Leo, Brooklyn. 2020. The colonial/modern [cis]gender system and trans world traveling. *Hypatia* 35 (3): 454–74.
Lepold, Kristina. 2021. How should we understand the ambivalence of recognition? Revisiting the link between recognition and subjection in the works of Althusser and Butler. In *Recognition and Ambivalence*, ed. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold and Titus Stahl. New Directions in Critical Theory. New York: Columbia University Press.
Lugones, María. 2007. Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia* 22 (1): 186–219.
Malatino, Hil. 2020. *Trans care*. Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press.
McDonald, CeCe, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, and Toshio Meronek. 2017. Cautious living: Black trans women and the politics of documentation. In *Trap door: Trans cultural production and the politics of visibility*, ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
McDowell, John Henry. 1998. *Mind, value, and reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
McNay, Lois. 2008. *Against recognition*. Cambridge: Polity.
McNay, Lois. 2021. Historicizing recognition from ontology to teleology. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, ed. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press.
McQueen, Paddy. 2015. Honneth, Butler and the ambivalent effects of recognition. *Res Publica* 21 (1): 43–60.
McQueen, Paddy. 2022. Recognition and social freedom. *European Journal of Political Theory* 21 (1): 89–110.
Owen, David. 2021. Freedom, equality, and struggles for recognition: Tully, Rancière, and the agonistic reorientation. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, ed. Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press.
Owen, David, and James Tully. 2007. Redistribution and recognition: Two approaches. In *Multiculturalism and political theory*, ed. Anthony Simon Laden and David Owen. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
Pippin, Robert B. 2008. *Hegel's practical philosophy: Rational agency as ethical life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Prosser, Jay. 1998. *Second skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Puar, Jasbir K. 2017. *The right to maim: Debility, capacity, disability*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gay Shame. 2009. A virus in the system. https://gayshame.net/.
Snorton, C. Riley. 2008. "A new hope": The psychic life of passing. *Hypatia* 24 (3): 77–92.
Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on both sides: A racial history of trans identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Snorton, C. Riley, and Jin Haritaworn. 2013. Trans necropolitics. In *The transgender studies reader*. New York: Routledge.
Spade, Dean. 2006. Mutilating gender. In *The transgender studies reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge.
Spade, Dean. 2015. *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. Revised and expanded edition. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64.
Stanley, Eric A. 2021. *Atmospheres of violence: Structuring antagonism and the trans/queer ungovernable*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Stryker, Susan. 2008. Dungeon intimacies: The poetics of transsexual sadomasochism. *Parallax* 14 (1): 36–47.
Taylor, Charles. 1994. The politics of recognition. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Tourmaline (published as Reina Gossett), Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. 2017. Known unknowns: An introduction to trap door. In *Trap door: Trans cultural production and the politics of visibility*, ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Tully, James. 2004. Recognition and dialogue: The emergence of a new field. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7 (3): 84–106.
Westbrook, Laurel. 2021. *Unlivable lives: Violence and identity in transgender activism*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
Zambrana, Rocio. 2013. Paradoxes of neoliberalism and the tasks of critical theory. *Critical Horizons* 14 (1): 93–119.
Zambrana, Rocío. 2015. Normative ambivalence and the future of critical theory: Adorno and Horkheimer, Castro-Gomez, Quijano on rationality, modernity, totality. In *Critical theory and the challenge of praxis: Beyond reification*, ed. Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi. Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
Zambrana, Rocío. 2017. Boundary, ambivalence, jaibería, or, how to appropriate Hegel. In *Creolizing Hegel*, ed. Michael J. Monahan. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International.
Zambrana, Rocío. 2018. What's critical about critical theory? Redux. In *From alienation to forms of life: The critical theory of Rahel Jaeggi*, ed. Amy Allen, Eduardo Mendieta, and Rahel Jaeggi. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

**Jules Wong** is doctoral candidate (ABD) in philosophy at the Pennsylvania State University. They work in ethics and social and political philosophy. Their research fuses feminist ethics, Frankfurt School critical theory, and trans philosophy. Their current project defends a social responsibility to meet trans needs, in the process bringing trans experience to bear on the metaphysics and normativity of human needs. They are a Forrest S. Crawford Fellow in Ethical Inquiry at the Rock Ethics Institute (2024–25). They hold a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship (2023–25).

**Cite this article:** Wong J. 2025. Ambivalences of Trans Recognition. *Hypatia* **40**, 269–289. https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press