

# The transgender space invader: Out of time and out of affect

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs)**Chloe Turner** 

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## Abstract

This short article builds on Nirmal Puwar's concept of 'space invaders' – individuals deemed anomalously 'out of place' due to discordant identity markers of gender and/or race. I offer a transgender reading of Puwar's work, to argue how following 'out of place' trans individuals are also positioned as both 'out of time' and 'out of affect' in a cisgender world. This piece highlights critical work on space, time and transgender feeling in the past decade following the perceived watershed moment of the 'transgender tipping point' in 2014.

## Keywords

transgender, temporality, 'out of affect', legibility, space invader

Nirmal Puwar's *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* was the theoretical scaffolding for my first graduate-level paper on how gender non-conforming people disrupt cishnormative legibility in single sex spaces. In the years since, and now under her PhD mentorship, Nirmal periodically asks whether I revisited or built upon that early work. In confronting the gap between my current articulations of trans identity and my past attempts, I experience the most dysphoric of transgender affects: *cringe*. Like most early graduate papers, it was bumbling and overdone. In 'Trans Assimilation and Cringe' Markbreiter (2022) argues that the concept of 'cringe' operates as a form of social control, which plays on the existing dysphoric relationship many trans individuals have to

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'being clocked' or visibly read as transgender. This process delineates particular transgender embodiments as valid or assimilable while relegating others as cringe worthy.

I offer a trans reading of Puwar's (2004: 8) theoretical positioning of bodies rendered 'out of place' to argue that transgender, nonbinary, intersex, and gender non-conforming people (going forward referred to inclusively as trans people) have been further displaced as 'out of time' – and subsequently 'out of affect' – since *Space Invaders*'s publication. Inhabiting an environment where 'the Right positions trans communities as cringe worthy and under deserving of the social body and its diminishing resources' (Markbreiter, 2022) the cringe response unsurprisingly emerges. This reaction, similar to the Spiderman meme where he squares up himself, stems from the hostile logics of trans marginalisation. The period between 2014's 'Transgender Tipping Point' and the present has been characterised by contradictory tensions, described as 'an extended *right now*' (Awkward-Rich, 2022 emphasis theirs) or 'longe durée' (Malatino, 2022: 1) unfolding between the hyper visibility of trans presence in the world and hyper violence towards trans populations. In the last decade, this charged interstice, framed as a cruelly optimist 'stretched out present' (Berlant, 2011: 50), infringed on the trans right to public or shared space: their presence has been persistently disavowed and legislated against.

Mirroring this spatial oppression and rights infringement, the time *of* violence has twisted into the weaponisation of time *as* violence, whereby transgender individuals are positioned as perpetually 'out of time'. I mean this both in the theoretical rendering of trans people as either past mythical figures or impossible future anomalies, yet crucially never viable in the present, in part because they 'jump over the present' (Israeli-Nevo, 2018), as well as to describe the tactics of stalling, lagging, and circuitous returns utilised by the State to ensure trans people are never in time with the pace and rhythms of others. When such constructions of space/time are strategically leveraged against those already deemed 'matter out of place' (Puwar, 2004: 10) trans communities inhabit an affective vacuum structured by alienation, 'feeling at odds with the world or that the world is odd' (Ahmed, 2010: 168), and dissociation, 'an archive of not feeling it' (Wallenhorst, 2021), to which I offer the framing: 'out of affect'.

Puwar's conceptualisation of the 'space invader', builds on Massey's (1996 (1994) autobiographical account of feeling like a 'space invader' as a woman standing on football terraces. Puwar theorises the space invader as a subject whose somatic presence appears anomalously 'out of place' within particular institutional sites and social arenas due to discordant markers of gender, race, or other identity categories. Such discordant subjects underscore the heteronormative, colonialist, spatial orderings of modernity, which privilege certain bodies as belonging while marginalising others. The 'disorientation and amplification' (Puwar, 2004: 11) observed when dissonant bodies, 'new' bodies, are encountered in spaces which have 'historically or conceptually excluded them' (Puwar, 2004: 1) aptly characterises how transgender people have encountered public space. The complex implications of transgender representation and recognition has been extensively examined within scholarly discourse and remind us of the insufficiency of visibility alone to bring liberation amid stagnant systemic configurations that perpetuate transphobic violence. As Gossett et al. (2017) noted on the perceived tipping point: the growing visibility of transgender identity creates a double bind, though it may confer greater legitimacy for particular, privileged individuals, this visibility simultaneously erases other, more marginalised trans

people, especially those facing economic hardship, racial oppression, or systemic barriers to self-representation rooted in racism and sexism. A point noted by *The Daily Beast*, the present feels less celebratory than a selective process, a ‘transgender *dipping* point’ (Allen, 2017) which reflects and reinforces existing social hierarchies with trans communities. Weils’ (2023) recent writing on the root of the phrase ‘tipping point’ is interesting here to plot how it indexes both threat and vulnerability under conditions of colonial racism. The notion of a ‘tipping point’ emerged in the 1950s to describe ‘white flight’ when an influx of Black residents joined cities: Grodzins (1957 in Weil, 2023) discusses the racist logics that framed these neighbourhoods as high-density, high crime areas devoid of social investment. Definitionally, in 2014, the *Time* magazine cover featuring Laverne Cox with the (complete) title: ‘The Transgender Tipping Point: America’s Next Civil Rights Frontier’ represents not a movement of people but a foundational change in gendered embodiment. The metaphor does not hold as this watershed moment, as there is no singular moment of arrival to begin with. But instead ‘rather than including trans wholesale as one category among others, state power seeks to manipulate the terrain on which democratic rights are extended’ (Weil, 2023: 190) where trans life ‘constantly flicker across the threshold of viability’ (Stryker, 2014: 40).

The disorientation of a public trans presence stems precisely from the perceived breach of classificatory borders that demarcate ‘appropriate’ gendered embodiment, ‘interpolated as not enough or too much’ (Malatino, 2020: 53), such perceived incongruence disturbs the supposed naturalness of the cisnormative order. This ‘jarring of framings’ (Puwar, 2004: 42) disorients both a fixed transgender ‘other’ and the construction of the cisgender self in relation. The secondary amplification effect is evidenced by the stark imbalance between the actual demographic proportions and rights-based requests of transgender populations for safety and self-determination, and the intensity of anti-transgender rhetoric that has firmly entrenched such discourse as the so-called ‘culture wars’. As Ahmed (2013) has observed in *Strange Encounters*, as well as in their blog entry ‘The Same Door’ (Feministkilljoys, 2019), trans populations in the UK are frequently positioned as outsiders not solely due to their perceived status as “‘bodies out of place” but as threatening those who are “in place”” – an extension of Puwar’s arguments. This perceived trans threat in the United States has triggered extensive legislation seeking to restrict access to basic education, organised sport, public washrooms, healthcare, and identity documents, which collectively contributes to the effective erasure of trans lives from civic participation and public sight (Gill-Peterson, 2022). By being positioned as those ‘out of place’ within cisgender society and who belong elsewhere, transgender populations have been legislatively relegated to an extra-spatial positionality – a point outside of place. The implications of this beyond-place extend from the colonial binary gender models positioning non-conforming genders and sexualities as ‘out of place’ within the imported cis-heteropatriarchal order: this is explored by contemporary queer and trans scholars like Lugones (2007), Matebeni (2013) and Camminga (2019) as pointed out by Tudor (2021). As transfeminist Sophie Lewis (2019) describes: ‘Middle- and upper-class White feminist have not received the pummelling from Black and Indigenous feminists that their American counterparts have, and thus, their perspectives retain a credibility and a level of influence in the Britain’. The distinctly British strain of trans-exclusionary feminism has been a hub of

research since the influential ‘TERF Wars’ (Pearce et al., 2020) a project conceived in 2018 after ‘the frustrating distraction’ (p. 882) of transphobic misinformation/disinformation campaigns leveraged to discredit and dislocate trans individuals from civic participation (Bassi and LaFleur, 2022; Thomsen and Essig, 2021; Worthen, 2022; Lambie, 2024). Trans communications scholar TJ Billard’s (2023, 2024) recent work examines such misinformation tactics and their role in cementing and circulating moral panic. I cite this recent research to underscore how just as transgender populations are discursively and materially connected to an ‘outside of space’ position, the malleable rhetoric of transphobia readily adapts across contexts, shapeshifting to resonate with localised cultural logics and anxieties surrounding gender.

DeVun and Tortorici (2018) in ‘Trans, Time and History’ unpack how similar erasures result from Johannes Fabian’s (2014 (1983) term ‘the denial of coevalness’ wherefore there is an academic tendency to temporally distance racialised subjects by discussing present-day groups as if they inhabited the past, or by portraying certain populations current temporalities as representing other people’s futures (Rifkin, 2017). Such rhetorical deployments of Time function to temporally estrange the observed from the observers’ contemporaneous timeframe: ‘they are negated a place in “our” here and now’ (Fabian, 2014 [1983]: 25). It is from this space/time dislocation, I extend Puwar’s analysis to the transgender position of being ‘out of time’. To be out of time captures layered feelings of dislocation and suspension from the normative passing, rhythms, and tides of time itself.

Scholars have increasingly examined how transgender embodiment, relationality, and political values trouble cisgender constructions of time. Kadji Amin’s (2014) ‘Temporality’ entry of *Transgender Studies Quarterly Keywords* underscored the sustained critical interrogation of the ‘temporal frameworks underpinning transgender experience marginalization’ (p. 219). A not-insignificant amount of foundation scholarship in transgender studies has centred on epistemological conceptualisations of ‘trans’ as an additional prefix to gender and its temporal inflections. ‘Trans’ was celebrated as a boundary crossing, expansive prefix for the ‘moving target’ (Stryker et al., 2008: 13) that is transgender identity that blurred binarised logics; for example, the role of ‘trans\* holding of the certainty of diagnosis’ (Halberstam, 2018: 4), or as Bhamji (2013) notes, ‘the prefix, trans- does not just signify movement across or beyond a schism [. . .] it is also evocative of the transgressions, transmogrifications, and transmutations of established norms’ (p. 521). In other words, the ‘trans-ness’ of transgender individuals is precisely the expression of inherent tensions within configurations of sex and gender. The dominant culture’s reduction of trans temporalities to discrete moments of ‘transition’ reflects broader attempts to control and incorporate trans experiences into the times and spaces of the State, society, and nation (Haritaworn, 2015; Puar, 2017; Spade, 2015). Drawing on legacies of feminist and queer of colour critiques on time (Ferguson, 2003; Keeling, 2019; Muñoz, 2009) scholars of transgender temporality foreground the ‘asynchronicity’ of gender coming-into-being, ‘at the margin of time’ (Harsin Drager and Platero, 2021), ‘as a thousand little gestures getting momentum’ (Carter, 2014: 236) and a ‘materialising of times to come’ (Chen and Cárdenas, 2019).

While the aforementioned transgender studies scholarship offers alternative framings of time, Amin cautions that contemporary trans taxonomy undermines earlier liberatory

visions. After almost 10 years since the initial ‘Temporality’ entry, Amin has critiqued the proliferation of highly specified gender and sexual identity labels within contemporary queer/trans communities. In essays ‘We Are All NonBinary’ (2022) and ‘Taxonomially Queer’ (2023), Amin (2022, 2023) argues that the rise of micro-identities including non-binary since the 2000s reflects internalisation of accelerated, and frequently digital, taxonomy logics of sorting, classification and demarcation. Through what Amin (2023) refers to as the ‘renaissance of taxonomy’ (p. 93), they highlight not just the ‘untimely echoes’ (p. 99) between sexologists such as Magnus Hirschfeld and contemporary queer uses of taxonomical method but ‘what proves harder to shake than the historical uses of taxonomy, however, are its epistemological premises’ (p. 100). It is precisely this epistemological mobility – the capacity to morph and shift contextually – that Amin argues we are squeezing out of the term ‘transgender’ over time, that anti-trans groups find so threatening.

It is critical to consider who is positioning transgender lives as ‘out of time’ and to what ends. For transgender scholars and cultural workers these critiques stem from a radical politicisation of time to often signal other potential animations of futures that are fraught in the present. Transphobic constructions of transgender lives as asynchronous, often wedded to questions of deception and/or proof of that which is ‘unreal’ serve to rationalise and extend material dispossession and violence against trans communities and even in death. For example, Eric Stanley’s (2021) *Atmospheres of Violence* engages with the symbolic violence inflicted upon queer/transgender individuals even after the extinguishing of their lives to understand the severity of contemporary anti-queer and anti-transgender rhetoric and policies. Stanley considers the repercussions of how queer/trans necropolitical violence (Snorton and Haritaworn, 2013) can often take the form of what Eric Stanley (2021) refers to as ‘overkill’, where trans life is ‘a threat that is so unimaginable’ that one is forced not only to murder but ‘to push the dead backwards out of time, out of history, and into that which comes before’, (p. 33). In the scapegoating of anti-trans violence as isolated, a privatising neoliberal ‘bad apple’ metaphor traffics the belief that systemic change is unnecessary when the remedy can be reduced to personal culpability and individual punishment. In doing so, the range and depth of queer/trans violence is rendered as a relic of the past and pushed out of view instead of being ‘held as indictments of the social worlds they are apart’ (Stanley, 2021: 34). This ideological displacement in projecting such violence into a historical past, complicates the ability to easily articulate its continued and mutated expression in current structural frameworks and sociocultural norms. Similar logics are present in how temporal violence operates through enforced ‘waiting’ imposed on transgender individuals. Institutional delays in accessing gender-affirming care or legal recognition, mandated by policies requiring arbitrary waiting periods, exemplify this temporally violent obstruction (McKay et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2021). The distress produced by deferred access to gender-affirming care has only intensified amid the delays of the COVID-19 pandemic (Eickers, 2020; Van der Miesen et al., 2020) due its classification as non-essential. As Heyes (2023) notes, those waiting for gender-affirming care experience ‘distortions of the perception of time’ such that the individual’s life ‘seems to increasingly stretch and protract time’ (McKay et al., 2022: 2). Such waiting exacerbates the deferral of the future for transgender subjects, such that the present period of unavoidable waiting stasis, suspending the individual in temporal limbo.

Outside of normative constructions of space/time, transgender individuals find themselves ‘out of affect’. I mean this framing two-fold: first to signal being outside or estranged from normative affect because of the anti-trans hostility that distorts trans experiences of place and temporality, draining access to collective feelings, and second a space of being drained of affect itself as a defense mechanism. Recent transgender work has built upon Ahmed’s (2010) ‘affect aliens’, those who experiences affective dissonance – feeling the wrong thing at the right time or the right thing at the wrong time ‘at odds with the world’ and experiencing a disconnect between their emotional states and the atmospheres/norms of the surrounding world ‘feeling that the world is odd’ (p. 165). Expanding on this conceptualisation, Malatino’s (2022) *Side Affects* argues for the trans specificity of certain bad feelings. They consider how trans subjects cultivate numbness as a method of navigating hostile environments, learning to selectively freeze out trans antagonism and gendered misrecognition through ‘affective withdrawal, social recessivity and dissociation’ (Malatino, 2023: 14). A numbness that operates as a ‘a divestment from forms of optimism that we’ve learned, intimately, are too often cruel’ (Malatino, 2023: 56). Through this lens, numbness represents a reactive attempt at self-preservation in a public sphere that so often questions the reality (or realness) of transgender existence. When such interrogations of trans reality are recursively internalised – encapsulated by Wallenhorst’s (2021) opening line ‘Am I real?’—dissociative tactics shift inward also. In agreement with Wallenhorst (2021), as they continue, dissociation may not be a phenomena to be mined for a ‘new or bad or queer feeling with a particularly valuable relationship to the contemporary’, shifting Cvetkovich’s (2003) framing ‘archive of feeling’ to ‘dissociation is an archive of *not* feeling it’. The cringe response then represents the outward ripple of this trans dissociative gap. The painful bind of being legible only through cisgender legibility leaves trans individuals suspended – out of place, out of time and out of affect.

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