

The Atmosphere of Trans* Politics in the Global North and West

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Abstract This essay scrutinizes the conundrum of recent trans* politics in the global north and west. Although this trans* politics has achieved important social changes for some gender-variant people, it at the same time participates in neoliberal notions of equality. In addition, while constructing a seemingly legitimate subject called *transgender*, this politics perpetuates colonial violence. This article suggests a turn to *atmospheres* as a crucial term to reassess this quandary. With a focus on discomfort, this article explores ways to decolonize and deprivilege transnational trans* politics in the global north and west. It argues that such an approach might open up ways to consider trans* politics as an imaginary that would enable fragmented realities, bodies, and selves to become legible and articulable and thereby also make it possible to name the constitutive violence that is at work in politics under the purview of *trans**.

Keywords global transgender politics, politics of affect, mood, empathy, discomfort

For several decades now, a wealth of local, regional, and transnational trans* communities, networks, and organizations have been emerging in different parts of the globe to counter the worldwide discrimination of *trans** people in diverse facets of life. Since the 2000s in particular, political activism initiated by trans* people and their allies has raised the awareness of politicians, legislators, and the general public regarding the challenges facing trans* persons. As a result, innovative legislation on gender recognition has recently been adopted or is currently being drafted in various jurisdictions.¹

This article takes as its point of departure this specific moment in recent trans* politics in the global north and west, a version of politics that rapidly grew strong, expanding from its predominantly local dimension to an increasingly global movement with transnational impacts. This version of trans* politics is pervaded by ideals of success and goal orientation and considered as progress for an assumed trans* community. However, as trans* activists and scholars aptly caution, these politics need not only be celebrated as progressive achievement for gender-variant

1 people. On the contrary, this version of trans* politics should also be seen as
2 assimilatory professionalization that normalizes and flattens out the differences
3 among the divergent needs of various trans* people. Building on this critique,
4 the purpose of this article is to explore the question, how can trans* politics—
5 particularly transnational trans* politics from the global north and west—address
6 current injustices without falling prey to the ultimately counterproductive accom-
7 modation associated with neoliberal notions of equality? And, furthermore, how
8 can these injustices be contested without perpetuating colonizing violence in the
9 process of constructing a seemingly legitimate subject called *transgender/trans**
10 that is bound up with questions of nation, geographical position, and citizenship
11 and is thus intertwined with racism, xenophobia, and class privilege?

12 In response to this dilemma, I argue that thinking affect and politics
13 together as imbricated may help reassess the conundrum of trans* politics
14 acting from a privileged position predominantly located in the global north and
15 west. I suggest that taking into account the affective entanglements of politics
16 under the purview of *trans** opens a way to consider politics as an imaginary that
17 enables fragmented realities, bodies, and selves to become legible and articulable.
18 It also makes it possible to name the constitutive violence that is at work thereby
19 in such trans* politics. This leads me to explore discomfort as an atmosphere in
20 privileged trans* politics located in and acting from the global north and west.
21 Such an atmosphere may enable kinds of change that work against a politics that is
22 unilateral, policy oriented, assimilationist, additive, and that elides plurality.

23 **The Euro- and U.S.-centric Regimes of Knowledge in Trans* Politics**

24 Awareness among the general public of the challenges facing trans* persons, as
25 well as the legislative achievements in confronting these challenges, are pre-
26 dominantly associated with the global trans* politics of institutions such as the
27 European Union. However, this politics is a result of trans* activists' increasing
28 challenge of the state's power regarding the regulations of legal and medical gender
29 assignment. Trans* activists more and more use the courts to hold their govern-
30 ments accountable for discriminatory practices with regard to trans* people's needs.
31 As a result, the Council of Europe, for example, recently stated that "severe vio-
32 lations of human rights occur in relation to legal gender recognition" (Council of
33 Europe 2015: 1) and called for a diminishing of those specific forms of discrimi-
34 nation that trans* people face. The regulation of *transgender* within legal, medical,
35 psychological, and public realms has been addressed in reports and surveys recently
36 commissioned by political entities in the global north and west. For example, the
37 European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a report in 2014 on the
38 multiple forms of discrimination against trans* people in all European Union
39 member states (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights FRA 2014), which
40

underscores the results of previous surveys (Whittle, Turner, and Combs 2008; European Commission 2012; Balzer and Hutta 2012). Particularly striking forms of discrimination cited in that report include violence; harassment; the widespread lack of gender recognition under the law; and the often lengthy, complicated, and pathologizing procedures necessary to obtain legal gender recognition, as well as difficulties in accessing appropriate general health care and gender-confirming treatment (see also Hammarberg 2009; International Commission of Jurists 2007; United Nations OHCHR 2012). As the Council of Europe points out, these reports aim “to provide law-makers with information on the challenges that transgender people currently face” (Council of Europe 2015: 1).

Indispensable as this recent, publicly highlighted role of transnational institutions is in the fight to enable and improve lives for many trans* persons, it has several limitations. To begin, the role recently taken on by these transnational institutions often eclipses the decades-long grassroots activism of trans* people that served as precondition for such institutional politics (see exemplarily Stryker 2008; Baumgartinger 2017; Wilchins 2017). Furthermore, informed by Euro- and U.S.-centric regimes of knowledge, these policies are steeped in colonial violence. This is evident if we scrutinize the politically commissioned reports themselves on which the European Union’s transnational politics regarding trans* are built. The imperative to examine these documents is prompted by the cautionary remarks of Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah (2014), who point out the importance of questioning the steady growth of politically commissioned research on trans* and to analyze the politics aligned with this research. Accordingly, it is crucial that the European Union’s official statements be examined to ascertain what they refer to when reporting on trans* and gender-variant lives. What political notions of *transgender* are these reports producing? And what are the effects this term has when it circulates in the global trans* politics of supranational entities such as institutions of the European Union?

The term *transgender* as employed in this commissioned research commonly denotes a broad range of gender-nonconforming people. Such subsumption of the multiplicity of gender variance calls for critical inspection. In doing so, I align my considerations with existing research in transgender studies, which insists that the historicity and cultural contingency of this term be borne in mind (Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizura 2013; Stryker and Currah 2014; Stryker 1998). As transgender studies scholars assert, the generalizing use of the category *transgender* in the global north and west has increasingly subsumed cross-cultural variations in nonconforming gender embodiments under an ontological Euro- and U.S.-centric category, a category that is bound up with narratives of modernization (Beollstorff et al. 2014; Aizura et al. 2014). In this regard, David Valentine (2007) points out that, as a category, *transgender* is often imagined

1 as a form of progressive modernity that restores outmoded conceptions of gender,
2 sexuality, embodiment, and identity (see also Davidson 2007). Accordingly, it
3 cannot be understood as a “modern” innovation but must be regarded as deeply
4 embedded in political and economic dominance.

5 The use of this category elicits the question of how the notion *transgender*
6 circulates within a colonizing project that grasps gender variance within predomi-
7 nantly white, Euro- and U.S.-centric frames of reference and regimes of knowledge.
8 This is evident in the following excerpt from the mentioned Council of Europe
9 report: “The emergence in Europe of the right to gender identity is a positive
10 development and may represent a model for future national legislations” (Council
11 of Europe 2015: 1). While the Council of Europe should be lauded for advocating
12 the legislative implementation of self-determined gender assignment for trans*
13 people, a measure also recommended by the European human rights commis-
14 sioner (Hammarberg 2009), the mode of how it does this must be questioned.
15 For, at the same time as it seeks to address the problem, this statement also
16 consolidates the idea of Europe as the “vanguard” of human rights as well as a
17 “model” for the “future” of trans* rights. What is problematic about the latter is
18 that trans* rights thereby become a crucial element of what appears to be con-
19 stitutive of so-called liberal democratic nation-states. Such calls for trans* rights
20 as generalized “human rights” (Council of Europe 2015: 1) has an impact not only
21 on European nation states; it also operates on a global scale. By acting on,
22 defending, and enforcing trans* activist claims to self-determine one’s gender
23 as a “universal” right issued by allegedly “avant-garde” European institutions,
24 such trans* politics reconstitutes and consolidates the colonial idea of Europe
25 as the locus of “modernity,” “progress,” and as the “cradle of democracy.” As
26 postcolonial and decolonial theory have shown (see for example Spivak 1988,
27 1990; Mohanty 1988; Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2001; Massad 2007; Puar 2007;
28 Kulpa and Mizelińska 2011), such approaches both anchor and proliferate
29 violent colonial regimes. Statements such as these by the European Council
30 propel the power to assert European global politics. Supranational institu-
31 tions such as the Council of Europe thus produce and consolidate a notion of
32 *transgender* that allows them to advocate for “justice” and thereby take on a role
33 of “vanguard” for human rights while reproducing violent colonial regimes of
34 knowledge. This has manifold consequences for the ways of living and of speci-
35 fying gender variance in nonprivileged contexts within and beyond the global
36 north and west. As such, transnational politics using the universalizing term
37 *transgender* refers to a legal, medical and political regulation of gender-variant
38 expressions that secures rights for some trans* people at the expense of others, while
39 reifying the inequity of participation in resources, and of recognition, representa-
40 tion, and survival (Aizura et al. 2014; Beollstorff et al. 2014).

1 However necessary it might be to continue engaging with such politics of
 2 “universal” human rights for trans* people, it is important—particularly from a
 3 perspective of politics from the global north and west—to address their violent
 4 impacts as well as the conundrum of this currently strong transnational presence
 5 of trans* politics. To do so, I focus on the affective entanglements of trans* politics;
 6 that is, I shift the perspective from the politics of recognition and rights to the
 7 affective dimensions of trans* politics.
 8

9 **The Affective Entanglements of Trans* Politics in the Global North and West**

10 Research from affect studies shed some light on how emotions and affects inform
 11 politics. Also referred to as the “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007): this
 12 strand of research takes affect, emotion, feeling, and sensation as significant
 13 matters of concern. In line with feminist, queer, and postcolonial critique, affect
 14 studies illustrates how emotionality and rationality, or subjectivity and objec-
 15 tivity, have been attributed to certain individuals in order to establish gendered,
 16 sexualized, racialized, and classed hierarchies (Lorde 1984; Ahmed 2000; Skeggs
 17 2005; Puar 2007; Butler 2009; Berlant 2008; for an overview, see Gregg and Seigh-
 18 worth 2010; Baier et al. 2014). Conceptually, my approach to the affective entan-
 19 glements of trans* politics is based on what Raymond Williams (1977) has called
 20 “structures of feeling.” Williams’s influential work understands culture as feelings
 21 that are entangled with regimes of power—not as “feeling against thought, but
 22 thought as felt and feeling as thought” (Williams 1977: 132). I furthermore conceive
 23 of affect as the crossover between body and mind, “inside” and “outside,” the self
 24 and the “other.” Like Sara Ahmed (2004), instead of asking what emotions *are*, I
 25 rather focus on what they *do*—that is, on how they contribute to the constitution
 26 of “inside” and “outside,” of the self and the “other.” In this regard, Ahmed writes,
 27 “In my model of sociality of emotions, I suggest that emotions create the very effect
 28 of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside
 29 in the first place. So, emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it
 30 is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or
 31 boundaries are made” (Ahmed 2004: 10). Thus, individuals do not possess emo-
 32 tions, but emotions direct the ways in which the self is placed in relation to the
 33 “other.” Put differently, the “inside” of the self is established only through the
 34 exchange of emotions with its “outside.”

35 This conceptualization allows us to view affect and emotion as both
 36 intimate and impersonal. In terms of trans* politics, this conceptualization blurs
 37 the clear-cut divide between the individual inside and the social outside of trans*
 38 lives. Discrimination and violence against trans* people, the obstacles to recog-
 39 nition of trans* people, and the lack of public awareness of trans* persons’ lives,
 40 persistently evoke various feelings. Whatever those feelings might be, they are,

1 however, neither purely individual nor solely socially induced, but are rather
2 reciprocal. Thus, when we consider a so-called feeling of “being” trans* and
3 feelings involved with a gender-variant expression as neither intrinsic nor as
4 socially induced and assigned, it becomes possible to interweave the “inside”
5 and “outside” of the self. In this way, affect can be understood as saturated by
6 regimes of power and, conversely, regimes of power can be understood as
7 pervaded by affect. Drawing on these insights from affect theory brings into
8 focus the formative force of affect for politics, which makes it possible to
9 consider emotion as a political resource for trans* politics. Accordingly, trans*
10 activism is to be conceived as an affectively saturated atmosphere rather than
11 the accumulation of feeling individuals. In order to reassess the conundrum of
12 trans* politics, I underscore the importance of moods in trans* politics as an
13 important addition to the felt experiences of trans* individuals. To begin, I scru-
14 tinize the structure of feelings of trans* politics and its repercussions on a global
15 level. In doing so, I consider a further site of trans* politics that promises to address
16 the problem of marginalizing particular trans* lives that the supranational insti-
17 tutions mentioned above fail to address and recognize adequately. This political
18 critique can be illustrated by recourse to the work of C. Riley Snorton and Jin
19 Haritaworn (2013). While other postcolonial and antiracist scholarship primarily
20 focuses on feminist as well as gay and lesbian politics, Snorton and Haritaworn
21 examine the global entanglements of trans* activism, which makes their research
22 particularly salient for the present argument.² A central feature of their work is to
23 point out trans* politics’ attachment to hate crimes against trans* people. While
24 Snorton and Haritaworn condemn the violence (often resulting in death), they
25 question the politics that addresses these hate crimes. This violence is made visible
26 by transnational-scale political projects, such as the community-building rituals of
27 the Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR), or statistical surveys like the Trans
28 Murder Monitoring (TMM) Project that systematically collects data on the killings
29 of trans* people worldwide. In their critical analyses of these projects, Snorton and
30 Haritaworn reference a form of power that Achille Mbembe (2003) calls “necro-
31 politics,” a term he uses to describe a regime of power that puts one part of a
32 population to death while it strengthens the vitality of another part of the popu-
33 lation. As Snorton and Haritaworn demonstrate, the politics targeting hate crimes
34 paradoxically fosters the bio- and necropolitical implications of trans* mortality
35 and trans* vitality. Accordingly, the mentioned projects on deadly violence, par-
36 ticularly against Black trans* women and trans* women of color, lay the foundation
37 for and are utilized by privileged white trans* activists who live in metropolises in the
38 global north and west (see Haritaworn 2015). When certain white trans* activists
39 assume politically leftist and queer-feminist positions—by engaging in struggles in
40 the name of queer diversity, by fighting for the recognition of trans* persons, in

1 confronting the violence against trans* people of color—they use hate crimes
2 against Black trans* women and trans* people of color as a resource to achieve
3 political aims that primarily serve to increase their own visibility, safety, and vitality.

4 Haritaworn furthermore shows how this activism is enmeshed with
5 racialization and ethnicization, as white trans* activists in the global north and
6 west locate the subject who afflicts trans*phobic violence in the figure that is both
7 of Islamic faith and economically precarious. Thus, through their affective
8 attachment to the trans* deaths of predominately Black trans* women and trans*
9 people of color, trans* activist campaigns against violence also draw strength from
10 the widespread racist panic around Muslims' alleged homo- and trans*phobia. As
11 Snorton and Haritaworn argue, these actions do nothing to fundamentally alter
12 the conditions under which the vitality of the lives of trans* people of color are
13 compromised; instead they instrumentalize the deaths of trans* people of color
14 for their own purposes.³ Rather than serve the well-being particularly of Black
15 trans* women and trans* people of color, their deaths function as a vital resource
16 for the development and global expansion of homo- and trans*normative political
17 projects.⁴ Such an affective political attachment to hate crimes by white queer-
18 feminist and trans* politics in the global north and west consolidates the idea of
19 Europe as “progressive.” It does so by turning trans*ness into a symbol of “free-
20 dom,” thereby legitimating imperial wars against the so-called terror, and by
21 accompanying such wars with restrictive and racist migration regimes in “Wes-
22 tern,” “secular,” and “liberal” nation-states.

23 Against the backdrop of this research, I suggest that the structure of
24 feelings of privileged, predominantly white trans* activism and transnational-scale
25 trans* politics in the global north and west that argue for a commitment to address
26 the needs of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised trans* individuals and groups
27 is based on affective attachments that enable collective political action and at the
28 same time coconstitutively performs racist, xenophobic, anti-Islamic, and classist
29 violence. This affective structure lays the foundation for the lived atmospheres
30 within trans* politics in the global north and west. Focusing on this growing form
31 of political action—and on how this version of politics is informed by the force of
32 affect, initially as it manifests itself in attachments and finally in atmospheres—
33 makes it possible to see the circulation of emotions within trans* politics as both
34 stabilizing and unsettling for political action and social change.

35 **The Atmosphere of Discomfort and the Imaginary of Trans* Politics**

36 In light of these findings that show the limits of political action and social change
37 in present trans* politics in the global north and west, the question is, how—
38 from a position of trans* activism in the global north and west—can we think of
39 an atmosphere in trans* politics that undoes the colonial violence and imperial
40

1 gesture outlined above? And, given the present remarkably violent constitution of
2 trans* politics, how can we conceptualize such an atmosphere while both taking
3 seriously the conundrum of transnational trans* politics in the global north and
4 west and rejecting political apathy? What affects might be generated in order to
5 rework trans* politics and communities in the global north and west so that we
6 question the conventional understanding of politics as progress rather than pro-
7 duce a seemingly neat solution to this conundrum?

8 My questions allude to the political potential of affects, which I want to
9 frame by referring to a critical approach to the so-called affective turn (Hemmings
10 2005; Leys 2011). In line with this critical perspective, I argue against positions that
11 consider an unequivocal understanding of affect as a promise for liberating
12 politics as well as for a paradigm change that renews theory. Therein I follow Clare
13 Hemmings, who argues that affect is a politically crucial force for connecting
14 individuals, yet still questions “its proponent’s over-investment in its positive
15 capacities” (Hemmings 2015: 149).⁵ Taking a multivalent approach to affect allows
16 us to see it as bound up with gendered, racialized, and classed regimes of power.
17 As queer, feminist, and postcolonial work within affect theory has shown (Ahmed
18 2004; Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2003), affect is a moving force in the creation of
19 attachments to and in the production of the normative, while also maintaining
20 the potential to transform norms.

21 Expanding this approach into the evaluation of trans* politics touched
22 upon above, I home in on the ambivalence of affect: while, on the one hand, affect
23 may offer alternative moods in current politics, on the other hand it may also
24 reinforce existing regimes of power. This is evident if we consider empathy, an
25 effect that constitutes the moving force for political action within the structure of
26 affect of the trans* politics of European institutions as well as of white queer-
27 feminist activists in metropolises of the global north and west. The Council of
28 Europe’s report, with its plea for novel legislation that enables the self-declaration
29 of one’s gender, for example, empathizes with trans* people’s distress concerning
30 the gender they were assigned at birth, and with their legal struggles to adopt their
31 self-determined gender. Likewise, the politics attached to trans* deaths that
32 Snorton and Haritaworn analyze feels for the marginalization and fatal violence
33 against trans* people of color. Both of these empathic attachments implicate pro-
34 cesses of violent colonizing and imperial hierarchization, exclusion and othering,
35 even as they simultaneously propel vital communities of trans* activists. The
36 ambivalence inherent in such empathic ways of conducting politics and building
37 communities warrants further scrutiny.

38 Feminist and postcolonial theory has shown how empathy and compas-
39 sion are built upon a historical hierarchy of categories of the privileged “here” and
40 the marginalized “there” (Berlant 2008; Dhawan 2013; Hemmings 2011; Spivak

1 1988, 2012). Supposedly suffering “others” are fixed in a site located beyond the
2 “innate here” of the privileged. The latter may, for instance, reify those in the
3 global south as racialized “other,” of an “other” faith, as socioeconomically pre-
4 carious, and/or as “illiterate.” Under these conditions, empathy transports a
5 powerful hierarchy that involves referring to the “other” through sentiment,
6 which leads to a hierarchical classification of the self and the “other.” This critique
7 of politics that takes empathy as the fulcrum for transformation, is apt. First, the
8 notion of empathy assumes a reciprocity of those expressing and those receiving
9 empathy. Empathy reifies rather than erodes the hierarchy between the self and
10 the “other.” Second, it is problematic to deal with disregard and rejection by solely
11 focusing on intersubjective encounters and on the reflective capacity of the empa-
12 thetic subject. Doing so largely conceals the functions and effects inherent within
13 relations of power and dominance. Thus, failure to recognize the historical and
14 political grounds for a lack of response to this reciprocity, and relying on the self-
15 reflexivity of the empathetic subject to resolve the problem of hierarchy-creating
16 knowledge regimes, apprehends, according to this critique, transformation as
17 individual and the individual as rational. This simultaneously assumes the
18 existence of and reifies the illusion of a coherent, autonomous and rational
19 subject, instead of acknowledging the subject as dependent, vulnerable, emo-
20 tional, and ambivalent.

21 The question that therefore arises is—in political mobilization and prac-
22 tices that aim to address the actual injustices that face trans* people—How can we
23 avoid colonizing moves that coopt and unify? How may we conceptualize rela-
24 tionality in a way that neither presumes reciprocity nor views political activism
25 through the lens of individuality, but instead views relationality as solidarity that
26 takes the form of decolonial and deprivileging practices—that is, that purposefully
27 disrupts structures of colonization and privilege?⁶

28 In order to think about this question in the present moment of trans*
29 politics, I suggest referring to the potential of affects notwithstanding its ambiv-
30 alence. We are currently in the global north and west in a political time of empathy
31 fatigue and increased racism, sexism, and homo- and trans*phobia that a newly
32 established nationalist, fascist, and right-wing politics explicitly endorse. The
33 fatigue of empathy with the marginalized and disenfranchised goes hand in hand
34 with a seemingly paradoxical growth in the range and intensity of emotional
35 expressions legitimated in the public sphere. Emotions are perceived, as Elaine
36 Swan suggests, “to provide a privileged source of truth about the self and its
37 relations to others” (Swan 2008: 89). There is a conviction that emotional knowl-
38 edge is direct and therefore more legitimate and real than other ways of knowing. In
39 other words, feelings are truth and truth is felt. In the face of this present moment, I
40 suggest thinking about collective political practices to fight discrimination, violence,

1 and death—if we are trans* activists in a privileged position—on the basis of an
2 undoing of the belief that emotions provide truth. I want to argue that neither
3 empathy nor critical self-reflection can provide a “true” way to endorse a political
4 commitment to the various needs of gender-variant people. However, even as we
5 must critique our inherent connection to the continued justification of imperialism,
6 as Nikita Dhawan (2013) argues, referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, there is no
7 escape from the colonial legacies of “justice” and “human rights,” which we at the
8 same time cannot not want. We have to learn to see ourselves as part of the problem,
9 which, however, not only entails an acknowledgement of complicity wherein we
10 need to dismantle the processes that convert us into advocates for justice and
11 rights; following Dhawan I suggest that solidarity is based on giving up the illusion
12 of sovereignty (Dhawan 2013: 149). Relating this to privileged trans* politics would
13 mean a decentering of our desire for “justice” by renouncing the performance of
14 the empathic, self-reflective, and “vanguard” trans* activist. This, however, doesn’t
15 mean that trans* activists from a privileged position should not engage in trans*
16 politics despite the dangers of reification. But my point is that, while engaging in
17 the fight for the various needs of gender-variant people, privileged trans* politics
18 in the global north and west must forfeit their “vanguard” position.

19 I argue that focusing on the potential of affect might help to question the
20 illusion of sovereignty, which needs to disrupt the intactness and coherence of
21 the privileged, Western, white, autonomous subject and body and thereby enables
22 us to forge new views on the complicities of trans* politics. Emotions and affect
23 are, however, not to be interpreted as a lens for getting closer to reality but rather
24 as a crucial element through which power is felt, imagined, and contested (Ahmed
25 2004; Berlant 2000). Referring to the violent power dynamics in the examples of
26 trans* politics delineated above, I suggest that privileged trans* politics in the
27 global north and west might instead resort to a sense of discomfort, rather than
28 focus on empathy with the figure of the generalized trans* person or with the
29 figure of the trans* person afflicted with deathly violence. Instead of thinking
30 trans* politics from a presupposed coherent trans* identity or shared feelings,
31 I propose picturing trans* politics in the global north and west as based on a desire
32 for social change that entails a feeling of discomfort. Yet, I do not grasp discomfort
33 as a feeling in a strict individual sense, that is, as a so-called “authentic” emotion
34 that functions as a preexisting foundation for politics (Berlant 2000). Instead,
35 I propose seeing discomfort as a mood that constitutes an atmosphere.

36 Taking as point of departure the critical approach to affect outlined above
37 (combining a focus on the force of affect with the critique of the so-called affective
38 turn), I propose that discomfort be conceived as a mood. Discomfort, like other
39 moods, is neither raw sensation nor pure reason but an ambience through which
40 one moves, something akin to the flavor of the present. In their comparison of

1 mood and affect, René Rosfort and Giovanni Stanghellini note that moods “often
2 manifest themselves as prolonged feeling-states” (Rosfort and Stanghellini 2009:
3 258) and are less volitional or transitory than affect. Mood is often used to grasp
4 an orientation to the world that causes the world to come into view in a certain
5 way. In this sense, a mood becomes an affective lens that impacts how one is
6 affected. Being in a certain mood makes the world appear in a specific way. Martin
7 Heidegger’s analysis of mood and attunement (*Stimmung*) suggests that mood is
8 ontologically prior to the exercise of will and cognition. He writes: “Attunements
9 are not side-effects, but are something which in advance determine our being with
10 one another. It seems as though attunement is in each case already there, so to
11 speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and
12 which then attunes us through and through” (Heidegger 1995: 66–67). A mood,
13 I suggest, constitutes an overall atmosphere that paves the way for ideas, helping
14 to determine what will matter or not.

15 Taking mood as the crucial term to scrutinize the conundrum of trans-
16 national trans* politics in the global north and west shows how in particular an
17 atmosphere of discomfort can animate activists to pursue a certain path of inquiry
18 and political action. At the same time, the process is reciprocal and dynamic—
19 i.e., styles of thinking and acting, in their turn, also promote and sustain moods.
20 From this perspective, trans* politics in the global north and west is paved by an
21 atmosphere of discomfort—an unease with and suffering from current legal reg-
22 ulations for gender-nonconforming people as well as the deadly violence against
23 trans* people—that in turn reinforces colonial and imperial hierarchies. Thereby
24 prevailing trans* politics consolidates precisely the feeling of discomfort it aims to
25 fight. Understanding discomfort in trans* politics in the global north and west as an
26 atmosphere circumvents the problematic implications associated with the feeling of
27 empathy touched upon above. In its dynamic reciprocity, mood is neither solely an
28 individual feeling nor only a firm ontological foundation that presses upon indi-
29 viduals, but both simultaneously. Or, as Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman write, the
30 concept of mood avoids such binaries. Mood emphasizes, instead, “its role in
31 modulating thought, acknowledging a dynamic and interactive relationship
32 between reason and emotion. Mood is tied up with self-understanding and shapes
33 thinking rather than being stifled by thinking” (Felski and Fraiman 2012: vi).

34 Hence, if a thing can appear differently depending on the mood we are in
35 and that surrounds us, then—putting it in Sara Ahmed’s terms—“moods matter
36 as the how of what appears” (Ahmed 2014: 14). In this sense, an atmosphere of
37 discomfort can restrict the sovereignty of the above-mentioned politically legit-
38 imate subject position *transgender/trans**. Discomfort as an atmosphere can foster
39 the acceptance of the ambiguity of knowledge, feeling, and judgment within
40 trans* politics in the global north and west, without necessarily giving up the

1 possibility of seizing agency under the purview of *transgender/trans**. Discomfort
2 does render trans* activism plural, ambivalent, insecure, and unstable, but it does
3 not make such activism dispensable. If actual injustices toward trans* people are
4 to be addressed from a perspective of trans* politics in the global north and west
5 in a less-violent manner, discomfort as an atmosphere might help to think soli-
6 darity as a feeling—with or not—with others, a feeling that does not become
7 clear cut or distinct in a romanticizing harmonic way. Along with one's sense of
8 what things mean and how they matter, moods inform one's felt connection or
9 lack of connection with others. Referring to Heidegger's German term *Stimmung*,
10 which is translated not only as "mood" but also as "attunement"—a term that
11 underscores the relational aspect of adjusting oneself to a certain mood—Ahmed
12 (2014) astutely carves out the ways of resonating or failing to resonate with others.
13 To be attuned to one another is to share in mood. A lack of attunement, or
14 misattunement, estranges some from others.

15 By pointing to discomfort as an atmosphere in conceptualizing hegemonic
16 politics, I want to underline the feeling of seemingly paradoxical unease with
17 attunement per se. An atmosphere of discomfort, notably in privileged trans*
18 politics in the context of the global north and west, would thus mean sensing ways
19 of being out of sync with the present world without assuming therein a harmony
20 but nevertheless aiming at a world where misattunement would not be considered
21 troublesome. Against this background, I suggest that we reassess affective soli-
22 darity in transnational trans* politics in the global north and west as a sense of
23 forging and being in a mood of discomfort with the present world, including
24 one's own strategies of political engagement, without expecting self-affirming
25 reciprocity in political attempts to bring about social change. As a consequence,
26 and according to Ahmed (2014), moods are not necessarily social or bring people
27 together. The mood of discomfort is thus both an obstacle to, and potential
28 catalyst for social change.

29 I conclude that the possibility to decolonize and deprivilege trans* politics
30 in the global north and west does not lie in an identity-based logic of inclusion.
31 Instead, a decolonize and deprivilege trans* politics rather focuses on discomfort
32 in political solidarity, while striving for collective social change. This discomfort
33 within the context of trans* politics of the global north and west might make it
34 possible to challenge and politicize the violent conditions in which this politics is
35 embedded. This, however, entails reconceptualizing trans* politics as an imag-
36 inative power rather than as an ideal form of political organization for social
37 change. Taking the atmosphere of discomfort as a starting point in order to engage
38 in decolonizing and deprivileging politics would hence not promote any kind of
39 universal political aims. Instead, the atmosphere of discomfort as a starting point
40 might sharpen our awareness of the limits of liberal politics of progress that

1 ascribes to an imperial logic. Only then might it become possible—in the words
 2 of Aren Z. Aizura, Trystan Cotton, Carsten Balzer/Carla LaGata, Marcia Ochoa,
 3 and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2014)—to “decolonize the transgender imaginary” in
 4 knowledge production and political action. As an expression of violent power
 5 formations, the atmosphere of discomfort readily points to the decolonizing
 6 potential of individual and collective politics and to potentially new forms of
 7 taking action. This affective politics, however, is a ceaselessly ongoing process of
 8 formation and realization. Thereby such affective politics resists defining a universal
 9 solution for a definitive progression toward reaching an end goal; instead, it opens
 10 up a way to consider trans* politics as an imaginary that enables fragmented real-
 11 ities, bodies, and selves to become legible and articulable and thereby also to name
 12 the constitutive violence that is at work in trans* politics in the global north and
 13 west. This might forge a collectivity that is necessary but impossible. A perspective
 14 from atmospheres of discomfort complicates easy notions of alliances along the
 15 lines of class, race, and gender and challenges the idea of collectivity while it warns
 16 against romantic notions of solidarity. I thus conclude borrowing Dhawan’s words:
 17 “Our solidarity efforts are indispensable and yet inadequate” (2013: 163).

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 19
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29 Notes

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 32 1. Such novel legislation is based on the self-declaration of one’s gender and does not
 33 require applicants to undergo complicated pathologizing and costly procedures for gender
 34 reassignment. For an overview see, for example, Amnesty International (2014).
 35 2. Extraordinary research in the field of postcolonial, antiracist theory focusing on gender
 36 and sexuality includes the illustrative work of Massad (2007); Puar (2007); Kulpa and
 37 Mizielińska (2011); El-Tayeb (2003); Yilmaz-Günay (2011); Kuntsman (2008); and Gunkel
 38 (2013), to name just a few.
 39 3. See also Yilmaz-Günay 2011 and Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014.
 40 4. See also Dean Spade (2011) for the regulation of trans* people in the form of databases as
 a form of violent administration that distributes vitality while contributing to necro-
 politics.

5. My argument also relates to the work of Lauren Berlant, who problematizes the politics of “true feeling” (Berlant 2000), a politics that, in a nonambivalent manner, grants emotions an explanatory value and status for politics.
6. Here, I refer to Gayatri Spivak’s (1990) call for the need to “unlearn one’s privileges.”

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