

Article

Forever Becoming: Teaching “Transgender Studies Meets Art History” and Theorizing Trans Joy

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Abstract: Academics often comment that their teaching affects their research, but how this manifests is often implicit. In this essay, I explicitly explore the artistic, scholarly, and curatorial research instantiated by an undergraduate class titled “Transgender Studies meets Art History,” which I taught during the fall of 2022. Alongside personal anecdotes—both personal and connected to the class—and a critical reflection on my pedagogy, I discuss the artwork and public programming connected to a curatorial project, “Forever Becoming: Decolonization, Materiality, and Trans* Subjectivity, I organized at UrbanGlass, New York City in 2023. The first part of the article I examine how “trans” can be applied to thinking about syllabus construction and re-thinking canon formation for a class focused on transgender studies’ relationship to art history. In the second half, I theorize trans joy as a felt vibration between/across multiplicity and singularity, belonging and unbelonging, and world-making and world-unmaking. Overall, I consider trans as a lived experience and its utility as a conceptual tool. As a coda, I consider the precarity of teaching this course in the current political climate of the United States.



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1. Introduction

This article, in part, reflects on my experience teaching an undergraduate class titled “Transgender Studies meets Art History” during the fall of 2022 at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.¹ Exploring the artistic, scholarly, and curatorial research put in dialogue with—and often set into motion by—the class is a primary focus of this essay. More specifically, I weave together a critical reflection of my pedagogy, a discussion of artworks related to my curatorial work at UrbanGlass, Brooklyn, where I was a curator-at-large during 2023, and personal anecdotes. This essay examines “trans” as an identity and a concept, as glimpsed through my classroom experiences and research.

Firstly, I want to clarify that my interest in sharing my experiences—in this case, primarily in connection to my teaching—is consistent with my overall scholarship that mobilizes the longer feminist tradition of auto-theory as a self-conscious way of engaging with lived experience alongside theory. However, I do not offer my anecdotes as autobiographically anchored “facts”. I am reminded of writer, curator, and artist Lauren Fournier’s point that “autotheory. . . is by no means solipsistic”. Her following point is particularly resonant in the classroom context and my theorization of trans joy, the focus of the second part of the article: “The singular can be a gateway to the multiple. And in theorizing together we may, after all, hear ourselves”(Fournier 2021).²

To illustrate the importance of considering pedagogy alongside my scholarly writing, it is worth noting that this journal rejected an earlier version of this article. When I initially submitted this article, I received the following response from this journal’s editorial team: “We will not process this manuscript further as it does not fit into the scope of

Arts. . . [m]aintaining a consistent scope is vital for the success of the journal". When the special issue editors further investigated the matter, they wrote, "It appears your paper was rejected because of its focus on pedagogy". The message is clear: discussions of pedagogy are not considered "significant research" and do not belong in a scholarly journal that "promote[s] critical inquiry, dialogue, and innovative approaches".³ Meanwhile, the only peer-reviewed journal focused on pedagogy in our field is *Art Pedagogy & Practice*, which began publishing articles in 2016. The dearth of writing on teaching in our discipline is partly because teaching is often not seen as important as publishing, especially within a research-driven university system.

This article counteracts the general scarcity of writing on art historical pedagogy and works more broadly against the de-linking of pedagogy from research. I begin with a meta-reflection of who should teach a transgender-focused art history class and follow this with theorizing the syllabus as trans and a discussion of visual diaries, a pedagogical tool I utilize to build/unbuild what art historian of transnational feminism Marsha Meskimmon, based in England, refers to as transcanons (Meskimmon 2023, pp. 19–62). I then pivot to conceptualizing trans joy as a *felt vibration* between/across multiplicity and singularity, belonging and unbelonging, and world-making and world-unmaking.

2. Meta-Reflection on Who Should Teach a Trans-Focused Art History Course

Before providing more context for the class and the syllabus, I want to take a moment to point out that I began the class by sharing that I identify as a queer person of color and nonbinary. "Queer" can be a catchall term for those identifying as LGBTQI+, the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, and intersex. The "+" refers to other identities not necessarily encompassed by the term. "Nonbinary" is one of a constellation of subject positions often connected to "transgender".⁴ I was not sure what the expectations of my students might be about my own identity, and I wanted to have a frank discussion not only about my relationship to the term "transgender" but also about *who* they think should be teaching a class focused on transgender studies.

We came to several conclusions as a group. First, it seemed counterintuitive and essentializing to assume that a transgender person or someone transitioning from M to F or vice versa should be the only person who could teach this class. Postcolonial studies scholar Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has pointed out that the position that "I am not x, so I cannot speak for x" can become an excuse for "not doing your homework", and bell hooks notes that such an approach might reestablish a context where a historically subordinate group must again "serve" their masters, this time as educators (Spivak 1990, p. 62; Hooks 1989, p. 118). In the end, the students and I settled on the idea that the most important thing is that whoever leads the course should be as forthcoming as possible about their intentions and their background. This aligns with the thinking of poststructuralist feminists like Spivak, who has advocated for some form of "strategic essentialism", which recognizes the necessity of occupying a subject position while acknowledging the limitations built into every position (Danius et al. 1993).⁵

Going through this exercise of who should or should not be teaching this class led to another discussion I had not planned. The students began to think critically about their relationships to the subject matter and some of their anxieties. For instance, about half of the students shared that they did not identify as transgender, nonbinary, or intersex and wanted to be respectful to those who did. Meanwhile, those who did identify as any of the latter made it clear that they had no interest in being representatives of the transgender community, and they also were quite vocal that they did not want anyone who was cisgender to feel like they could not speak to the subject matter.

3. Syllabus as Trans

Recently, there have been some overt gestures to think about transgender studies in/with our discipline, such as those by art historians such as David Getsy, Amelia Jones, and Ace Lehner (Getsy 2015; Jones 2016; Lehner 2021b).⁶ I was encouraged to teach

“Transgender Studies meets Art History” in the fall of 2022 because earlier in that year, Getsy and Che Gossett had published “A Syllabus on Transgender and Nonbinary Methods for Art and Art History”, an open-access essay in *Art Journal Open*, initially published in the print issue of *Art Journal*, an outlier in that it embraces discussion of pedagogy.⁷ Their syllabus offered a set of bibliographies organized around broad themes such as abolition, visibilities, materialities, flesh, and form “to prompt new alliances between transgender studies and art history” (Getsy and Gossett 2021). They also presented transgender studies as intersectional with race, class, and ability, among others. They aimed not to present a comprehensive syllabus and “encourage[d] the selective use and remaking of the topics”.

Since this was an undergraduate class, I focused on fewer texts and did not include some articles that might be too challenging for a student with little to no background in art history. About three to four weeks into the class, I announced that the syllabus would be in process, or trans itself, as we went through the semester to reflect on our conversations. While I was certainly queering the syllabus, I am inclined to use trans because it resonates with how we sometimes talk about trans bodies. For instance, I often say that I am “building” or “constructing” a syllabus, and re-assembling something carefully laid out involves metaphorically cutting and re-stitching bodies of knowledge. However, in the American and British contexts, syllabi are generally seen as a “contract” between students and instructors. While instructors can make changes, it is often frowned upon. The syllabus is like an edifice once completed or, in architectural terms, a “frame structure”, which refers to a rigid arrangement of parts, or structural components, fastened together.⁸

Since syllabi are often the mode through which canons are reified, a syllabus that responds to conversations in class suggests that canons can never become a stable ground or architectural foundation. More to the point, I discussed how the syllabus was “forever becoming” with my students to avoid the artworks feeling like they were being added to what could be described as a normative white, Western European/American art history canon. Meskimmon has theorized transcanons that I find helpful in thinking more broadly about the relationship between syllabus construction and pedagogy to canon formation (Meskimmon 2023, pp. 19–62). One of the reasons I am particularly interested in this yoking of “trans” to canon is because it emphasizes trans studies’ interest in reconstruction/recovery rather than one of deconstruction, where the building often becomes overshadowed by the conceptual unbuilding.

Meskimmon cites one strand of her complex thinking around this term, emerging from the art historian Nikos Papastergiadis’s theorization of the “spherical consciousness from the South” (Papastergiadis 2010, p. 148). She writes that this is his “way of understanding the profound transhemispheric entanglements that colonization set into motion and that continue to ground geopolitics in a ‘naturalist discourse of magnetic polarities’” (Meskimmon 2023, p. 38). Emphasizing transcultural rather than bounded regions is a feature of a trans syllabus that disrupts the clarity of a singular canon. In my class, I screened the video work *Ex Nilalang* (2015) by Justin Shoulder and Benji Ra, both based in Australia and of Filipino descent, which speaks to “transhemispheric entanglements” through exploring pre-colonial sexualities (Club Ate 2015). About twenty minutes long, the video is composed of three parts—“Balud”, “Dyesebel”, and “Lolo ex Machina”—which reimagine Philippine mythological folklore, pop culture, and ancestral spirits, respectively.⁹ Depicted in “Balud” is the mythological female known as Manananggal—a beautiful woman by day and a “monster” by night. Spanish colonialists turned this figure into something to be feared, supposedly to combat what they perceived as both the precolonial Filipinos’ unabashed sexual liberation of women and their high regard for nonbinary and trans subjects.

Trans syllabi also trouble the chronological, teleological, and linear formation of knowledge in normative canons. To underscore this idea, I presented artworks mirroring this aspect of the syllabus I theorize. For instance, Poland-based artist and film studies professor Wojciech Puś’s experiential film *Endless* (2015–)—based on their friendship with a trans woman in Poland—is non-narrative.¹⁰ Puś has said that doing so was meant to

challenge the notion that being trans is a journey with a beginning and ending (Patel 2017). Body modifications for transgender people have often been understood through medical and psychiatric protocols that reify a language of discovery and destination. As one of my students shared, many procedures are not followed in any order (for various reasons, including fiscal ones), and the surgical building/unbuilding of the corporeal body has no clear endpoint, nor one that will be the same for everyone. I also incorporated the work of Carlos Motta, who is based in New York City and of Colombian descent. I screened his 2015 work *Deseos*/رغبات (Desires) (Figure 1)—discussed in one of the readings on the Getsy and Gossett syllabus—that place queer and gender-variant historical characters within a chronological framework that is fluid and not linear (DeVun and Tortorici 2018).

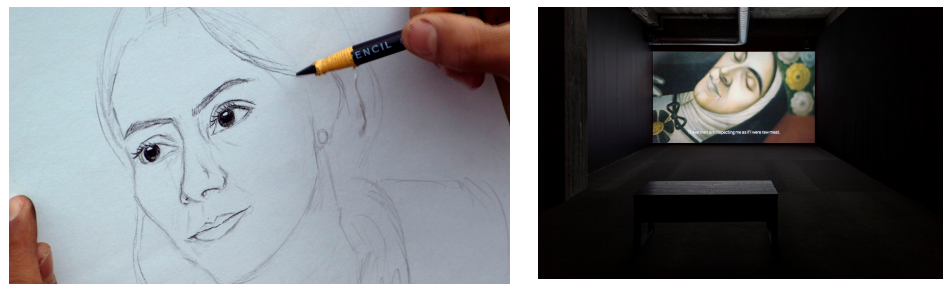


Figure 1. (Left) Carlos Motta, *Deseos*/رغبات (Desires), (Motta 2015), still, HD video 16:9, color, sound, 32:37. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon and Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris; (right) Installation view of *Deseos*/رغبات (Desires), 2015, at Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2015. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon, and Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

One character in Motta's work spoke in Arabic: a student who grew up speaking this language conveyed to me that it was the first time in their life that Arabic had been a part of a discussion of transgender identity. Since I casually knew the artist, I invited him to my class to discuss this work. My student was moved to tears during his visit, and honestly, so was I, as I remembered the first time I heard Gujarati, my first language, being spoken at a queer party.¹¹ The works of Puś and Motta point out the irony that contemporary artists, as Getsy and Gossett point out, "have been making work that gives form to the politics and emotions of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex experience in exciting ways", but art history as a discipline has been slow to "engage the robust and decades-old interdisciplinary field of transgender studies" (Getsy and Gossett 2021).

4. Visual Diaries: Teaching Nearby and Walking Alongside

Another way I attempted to keep the syllabus "under construction" was by using "visual diaries", a pedagogical tool that I have found successful within many of my courses because they shift art history to storytelling. Embedded in art history is an element of fiction that underscores its partiality. There can always be another story, another way of looking at seemingly the same set of assumptions (or "facts"). I shared with the class an article I had written, "Visual Diaries: Towards Art History as Storytelling" (Patel 2022). For a visual diary, students are asked to collect ten images connected to the weekly readings. These images did not have to come from the articles. They could include their artworks, personal photographs, and broader visual culture, but they had to connect back to the readings, if even in a provisional way. The visual diary assignments encouraged my students to think through the visuals and leave language aside, or at least until they got to class to discuss the images through spoken word. Ace Lehner has noted that "Transness throws into question the way cultures ideologically descended from the colonial project have sutured 'reality' to the 'privileging of sight'" (Lehner 2021a). The visual diary assignments attempted to challenge the conflation of visibility with the certainty of knowledge by demanding a total rethinking of how the visual connects to spoken and written languages.

The “presentations” were meant to be performative, so students were asked to think on their feet in oral language. Like the “Pecha Kucha” presentation style, each of the ten images they selected would only be up for 20 seconds, for a total presentation time of three minutes and twenty seconds, followed by short two to three-minute discussions per presentation. Students were asked to tread the fine line between knowing enough to discuss the images but not too much so that the presentations would merely convey what they had already figured out. I wanted them to approach knowledge as processual—much like I was approaching the syllabus—and it took some time for them to get the hang of this approach since students are not often asked to share ideas in progress. Several times a semester, students also reflected on their experiences in class in written language.

Students were asked to “introduce themselves” in the second class through this visual diary format. Importantly, though, I told them they would be re-introducing themselves weekly through the presentations but with an eye toward the readings. In other words, the visual diaries were strategic and meant to overlap ideologically with how I articulated trans throughout the class. This was partly to take the pressure of pronouns being stable. The idea was that our identities are constantly in flux. I did not want to marginalize those who had decided to transition from one gender to another. Instead, it was to acknowledge that we should privilege all the moments during, before, and after transitioning.

While I was mindful of the power dynamic between them and me as an instructor, utilizing visual diaries was my way of “just speaking nearby”, as articulated by filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha (Minh-Ha 1992, p. 96). Concerning her film *Reassemblage* (Minh-Ha 1982), she acknowledged the difficulties in speaking either “as” a third-world woman herself, “for” women in Senegal, or even “with” Senegalese women. In a class like this, which attracted students whose personal lives were so closely connected to the subject matter under discussion, it felt important that each student could speak to their specific relationship to transgender subjectivity through their visual diaries or storytelling. As transgender studies scholar Caél Keegan has noted, the field of trans studies “has long been concerned with narratology—with the project of locating narrative structures that will adequately allow for the existence of trans* bodies and becomings” (Keegan 2018, p. 387). At the same time, visual diaries are meant to rupture any sense of linear temporality in that they are consolidated through a mishmash of visual, spoken, and written word storytelling that happens out-of-sync—visuals are organized before class, the spoken word takes place during class alongside the visuals, and writing takes place after both.¹² Moreover, any sense of singular subjectivity becomes impossible because students share them with a group with whom they have a short discussion after their unscripted presentations. In an article in which art historians Ming Tiampo and Birgit Hopfenor recount their teaching practices, they note, “Pluriversal approaches to art history are necessarily collaborative, as collaboration is a central aspect of . . . articulating a critical global art history” (Tiampo and Hopfenor 2022, p. 148).¹³ Visual diaries as a pedagogical tool of a trans syllabus helped me build/unbuild a collaborative transcanon that, as Meskimmon writes, “tell stories that converse with, and walk alongside, pluriversal worlds” (Meskimmon 2023, p. 22). Thinking of art history as storytelling empowers students to create the histories they deserve and consider them in dialogue with those they may not see in the classroom. In addition, it helped me better walk alongside the pluriversal worlds they share.

5. Towards Theorizing the “Trans” in Trans Joy

One important critique of the class by my students was around readings that discussed statistics of transgender of color death that, of course, are disheartening, as is the rise of states pushing through anti-transgender bills in the United States (Astor 2023; Nakajima and Jin 2022). Understandably, my students wanted to read and think about how to live and thrive in the present. I am so used to “difficult” subject matter that I sometimes forget what it might mean for a student, especially an undergraduate, to be exposed to such writing. My students taught me that scholarship can sometimes commit its own kind of violence by leaning towards an abstraction of lived experiences. So, I encouraged them to

highlight “joy” (however they wanted to define this term) in their weekly visual diaries. Beyond this, though, I did not know enough about this topic to address it further. After the class ended, I began exploring the concept of “trans joy”. First, it is essential to note that “trans joy” is indebted to the work of activists of color, such as Kleaver Cruz, who was credited with coining “#Blackjoy”.¹⁴ Art historians Crystal Ann Nelson and Michelle Yee have recently co-edited a special issue of *Art Journal* (fall 2023) on the “color of joy”, underscoring how thinking about the intersections between race, gender, and sexuality cannot be seen as outside of each other.

Women, gender, and sexuality studies scholar J. River Vooris chaired a panel on “trans joy” at the National Women Studies Association (NWSA) annual conference in late 2023.¹⁵ In their call for papers, they note that a “positive affect” can be a kind of productive activism and that trans joy, particularly, “decenters narratives of trans suffering in favor of stories of trans achievement, reclamation, and ecstasy”. Through discussing her artworks, Ace Lehner examines trans joy similarly (Lehner 2022). Scholars of transgender studies, such as Hil Malatino, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Cameron Awkward-Rich, have cautioned against this more palliative turn to joy (Malatino 2022; Gill-Peterson 2021; Awkward-Rich 2022). Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Gill-Peterson writes, “Optimism is a stubborn clinging to the scene of transcending the wear and tear of contemporary life that actually ensures its permanent exhaustion” (Gill-Peterson 2021). Malatino argues that “...you can’t just flip the joy switch. The influx and efflux of sad passions take their toll. They demand reckoning; there’s no easy movement beyond them” (Malatino 2022, p. 12). At the same time, sitting in a room with students having trouble finding joy and whose mental health needs I wanted to pay attention to, I leaned towards a more affirmative understanding of it. It felt unethical to push them too much—although I did as much as possible. None of these scholars are arguing for a wholesale rejection of joy. For instance, Awkward-Rich notes that they do “not set out to contest the critical value of potentially good trans feelings—euphoria, curiosity, hope, earnestness—nor to mire trans studies permanently in the well of loneliness” (Awkward-Rich 2022, p. 16). I would say my position is that trans joy belongs in a messy place that neither promises salvation nor disavows it entirely. More to the point, trans joy in the classroom versus theorizing it are two separate things.

The remainder of this article is focused on theorizing trans joy through a combination of anecdotes—both personal and from my class—my curatorial work, which took place after the class concluded, and theory. Moreover, I want to clarify that while I was prompted by students’ concern about focusing on death and dying in the transgender community, the “trans” in trans joy I am theorizing is not meant to imply that the author-artists of the works I explore all identify as trans nor that the artworks are only concerned with trans issues. They do, though, deal more broadly with LGBTQI+ identities. My horizontal listing here, of course, belies that ever-expanding acronym of identifications.

The prefix “trans” can refer to a movement or crossing. I specifically mobilize trans because it signifies how identity is always in process or “forever becoming”, the title I used to describe the exhibitions I organized at UrbanGlass. While queer destabilizes, trans, as I conceptualize it, often refers to a push and pull between or among seemingly fixed, known, and frequently highly politicized constructions. Trans instantiates vibration, which is metaphorical as much as it is embodied. When attached to concepts such as nationality, culture, gender, syllabus, pedagogy, and joy—all of which are of concern in this article—it can unsettle their meanings. I am effectively mobilizing trans in the way Jack Halberstam explains his decision to add an asterisk to trans to “open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance” (Halberstam 2017, p. xiii and 4). The asterisk mark signifies the conceptual overlaps among the often-overdetermined categories and the slipperiness of transgender.

I focus on Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo’s exhibition and related public programming involving the artists Cassils and Erika Diamond. I theorize three kinds of “trans joy” as a felt vibration between/across multiplicity and singularity, or multiple and one, belonging

and unbelonging, and world-making and world-unmaking, respectively. As I turn to curatorial and artistic research, I am moving away from lengthy discussions of pedagogy. Still, I do weave anecdotes connected to my class in each of the forthcoming sections.

6. Trans Joy as Multiple and One

In my class, “visual diaries” allowed every student to take center stage every week. I wanted every student to speak in class and to enable the development of empowered individual voices and perspectives. What I did not anticipate, though, was that this experience also contributed to creating a collective voice. Students often referenced an image or concept other classmates had shown or presented, creating conversation. This also led to group projects that I did not assign. For instance, my students discussed that they wanted to ensure that people knew this course was being taught precisely because there was always the chance it may not be in the future. So, the students produced a zine (Figure 2), a self-published book usually reproduced by a photocopier, as in this case. The zine was placed in front of a monitor, where the students’ final assignments were displayed in the hallways of the Tyler School of Art building. For this concluding project, students were asked to produce “visual diaries” in a PowerPoint (PPT) format, exploring the following question: what does trans do rather than what is trans? They decided that each student in the class would choose one image for the zine to answer the same question I posed for the final assignment. The zine can be found online.¹⁶ The students also discussed putting together a book that could be donated to the library.



Figure 2. (Left) folded zine, 2023, by my students: kieran becker, Isabella Darlington, Mihael Artemus Ivashchyshyn, Naz Khoury, Yoona Lee, Brian Leung, and Joshua Ulysses Ribera; (right) unfolded zine. Photo courtesy of author.

There are fascinating interconnections between the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s concept of “multiple and One” concerning what manifested in the classroom: my purposeful method of allowing each student to have an individual voice and a collective one I had not anticipated. Glissant’s phrase refers to the multiplicity and singularity embedded in subjecthood. Drawing on the metaphor of an archipelago, a geological formation of a chain or series of islands scattered in a body of water with no clear center, Glissant notes that each island is simultaneously its own entity and always already in relation with the other islands. Each island is “both multiple and One, and inextricable” (Glissant 2005, p. 15). He even wrote that the world is becoming a veritable archipelago (Glissant 1997, pp. 193–94).¹⁷

The planning for my first UrbanGlass exhibition, a solo show of the works of queer-identified Cuban American artist Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo, was already well underway when I began to teach my class. Still, it was deeply connected to Glissant’s idea of “multiple and One”, which was further reinforced by what occurred in my classroom (Glissant 2005).¹⁸ In this section, I examine Duncan-Portuondo’s ongoing nomadic installation, *Club EXILE*, a response to the 2016 Orlando, Florida, Pulse club shootings, the victims of

which were primarily queer Latinos/as, instantiating a felt vibration between multiplicity and singularity.

A few days before the show opened, the artist invited the public to assemble mirror tiles to create mosaics that would become part of the altar (Figure 3). The artist, his partner, his mother, and his sister helped teach participants the basics of glass cutting. Food, music, and drinks set the mood for the club-inspired glass mosaic workshop. In this sense, the word “solo” to describe Duncan-Portuondo’s show is only partially accurate. I argue that he is likely more interested in bringing people together than feeding into the myth of the singular artist as a genius. The work is not about the final material form but rather the collaborative process of getting there.



Figure 3. Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo and community participants, *Club EXILE Altar*, 2023, 9' × 10' × 6', mirror mosaic, photo portraits, neon, fabric flowers, diverse sacred material. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The artist refers to his installation as a “disco chapel”. Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson has poignantly written about his experiences at black queer southern clubs “where queer nightlife and church” and “sexuality and spirituality” blur (E. Johnson 2021, p. 231). As 2022 Lambda Literary Award finalist Jen Winston succinctly puts it: “In terms of worship, and safety, gay dance floors gave me more than any cathedral ever did” (Dumais 2022). The atmosphere was convivial that evening while we were working together to create the altar, but it was punctuated by more somber moments. For instance, the artist nudged participants to use their phones to get to know the victims whose images were in the frames that we adorned with colored markers, strips of fabric, and glitter—these more self-reflective moments of finding out more about the individuals who had been killed shifted the mood from time to time. When the panels of the altar were put into place, the artist asked everyone to come up one by one to place a flameless candle, an electronic alternative to traditional wicks that would be forever burning, onto the altar. Participants could also place the portraits they had been adorning. This act was more of a collective mourning. The mood, though, that night would shift to a collective joy. In the project’s previous iteration in Miami, Duncan-Portuondo had a night of drag performances. I knew the drag performer Zacrilegious, who lives in New York City, and I asked if they would be willing to organize a night of drag performances from those they knew.¹⁹ As Duncan-Portuondo noted, when Zacrilegious took over as emcee, those who went to Pulse were there to have fun and celebrate life. Overall, the evening of the workshop, collectively

building/installing the *ClubeEXILE Altar* and drag performance, instantiated trans joy as a felt vibration between collective and individual mourning and celebration that evening.

Returning to the word “exile”, written in capital letters in the work’s title to emphasize its importance to the artist, Duncan-Portuondo’s family emigrated from Cuba, an archipelago in the Caribbean Sea, to Miami—a city shaped into a home by exiles from various parts of the Global South. Indeed, what makes Glissant’s thinking on archipelagoes so surprising and, therefore, deeply compelling is that he is acutely aware of the horrors that European colonization has wrought on most of the world—he grew up and lived in Martinique—yet he holds onto the belief that interconnectedness is still something worth striving for. In previous workshops the artist had organized, he asked participants to give him three songs referencing exile and home. I had given him the disco-inflected song “Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy Aaja” from the 1982 Bollywood movie *Disco Dancer*, British rapper M.I.A.’s 2007 feminist appropriation of it, the up-tempo, pop-electro “Jimmy”, as well as the British band Bronski Beat’s 1984 synthpop “Smalltown Boy”, a bittersweet song about a young gay man who is bullied, shunned by his father, and therefore ends up leaving home. Duncan-Portondo effectively created a sonic atmosphere that would pivot between home and exile, depending on the song playing. Of course, it would not be apparent to every person what any of the sounds/lyrics were meant to signify, and, in this way, what was felt was uncanny. The latter, which translates into “unhomely” in German, is an apt metaphor for the sonic atmosphere orchestrated by Duncan-Portuondo that challenges, extends, and troubles the notion of and is felt as a sonic vibration between the poles of the home/exile binary.

7. Trans Joy as Belonging and Unbelonging

The shootings at Club Q, an LGBTQI+ establishment in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in November 2022 took place while I was teaching the transgender class and planning Duncan-Portuondo’s exhibition. Five individuals were killed, and 19 others were injured (Babineau et al. 2023). Unfortunately, my students did not have the opportunity to process it as a group, given that this happened during fall break, and we only had one more class that had to take place on Zoom because I was out of town. I was still processing the horrific event myself, but I offered to meet with them one-on-one. The students, though, did reflect on it in the written parts of their visual diary assignments. As I noted earlier, the visual diaries were not entirely about responding visually and through spoken word to the week’s readings. Students were asked to introduce written language at several points during the semester. These assignments were carried out outside of class, allowing them to consider what written language might afford that visual and oral language might not. The reflections suggested that what had happened at Club Q gave them pause to re-assess their previous wholesale rejection of discussions of death. One student (and I am paraphrasing) wrote that joy can only ever be understood if one experiences its opposite, and therefore, it is challenging to consider joy and pain as mutually exclusive. This stuck in my mind, and in February of the following year, it became, in part, the impetus for me to organize a Zoom panel (open to the public) as part of Duncan-Portuondo’s exhibition to tease out trans joy further. I invited the trans-identified artist Cassils and the queer-identified artist Erika Diamond, both based in the United States, who had also made artworks in response to the Pulse murders, to be part of the discussion. I examine Cassils’ work in this section and Diamond’s in the next in tandem with some of the points made during our hour-long conversation.

I begin with a focus on Cassils’ work *103 Shots* (2016) (Figure 4), which is about two and a half minutes long and shot in black-and-white, a response to the Pulse shootings (Cassils 2016). Their website notes that Cassils was “struck by the testimony of one of the survivors”.²⁰ They further stated that “a man who said one of the reasons he did not react immediately to the gunshots was that he initially perceived them at first as the celebratory noises of ‘fireworks or balloons popping’”. This was the starting point for the poignant video, which shows couples bursting balloons between their bodies as they embrace.

Cassils filmed the work in San Francisco Dolores Park with approximately 200 volunteers, and the setup was inspired by Gran Fury's "Kissing Does Not Kill" campaign in the early 1990s. One hundred three shots were fired that night at Pulse, so the work's soundtrack includes recordings of the same number of balloons popping. When I first experienced the work at their retrospective in Texas, I heard the video before I saw it. I immediately thought I heard gunshots but realized this was not the case when I saw the video. It was my knee-jerk reaction: if you watch the video without playing the sound, you feel joy and laughter. Much like Duncan-Portuondo's work, there is a focus on togetherness. However, Cassils' work more acutely registers the precarity of belongingness.



Figure 4. (Left) Cassils, *103 Shots*, video still No. 1, 2016. Photo: Cassils with Zen Cohen. Courtesy of the artist; (right) Cassils, *103 Shots*, video still No. 2, 2016. Photo: Cassils with Zen Cohen. Courtesy of the artist.

As part of the panel discussion, Cassils mentioned that one hardly hears anyone discuss the attack on the mosque (where the shooter, Omar Mateen, had at least on one occasion prayed) shortly after the shootings (Sutton and Park 2016). I was particularly struck by Cassils' observation about the Islamophobia that was tied to the response of some to the Pulse tragedy. Islamophobia and homophobia are often tied together as they were in the discourse surrounding the speculation behind Mateen's murderous acts. The media initially characterized his actions at the nightclub as partially stemming from his inability to reconcile his queerness with his Muslim identity (Greenwald and Husain 2018).

I was visiting family in central Florida when the Pulse shootings took place, and I felt the tension between my queerness and "brownness", but not in ways I expected. To explain, I share an anecdote before circling back to Cassils' work. Often playing in the background when I visit my parents' home are comedies and soap operas that are part of the Indian television station Zee TV, Hindi-language programming. Consumed by many South Asian diasporic households in the US, these programs are sometimes explicitly homophobic. However, during this visit, I was surprised to find television advertisements that fostered acceptance of queer children of South Asian descent. One involved a Muslim family with a father wearing the customary traditional headdress (NQAPIA 2016a). The bilingual ads, I discovered, were produced as part of NQAPIA's "Family Is Still Family" campaign and meant to air around Pride (NQAPIA 2016b).

So, for me, during the time of the Pulse shootings, my world had turned topsy-turvy. I found a glimmer of queer South Asian belongingness within the traditional South Asian home space where I typically do not feel it. At the same time, the dominant media's splintering of queer subjectivity from Muslim/South Asian identity when discussing Mateen had effectively foreclosed the possibility of finding belongingness where I expected to find it: outside of what my parents' home represented to me. The advertisements did not appear after Pride, so the space of my parents' home swung back to feeling like one of not belonging, but the outside world had not entirely swung back to feeling safe, let alone a space of belonging or joy.

I argue that Cassils' work can be felt as a vibration between belonging and unbelonging. Like Duncan-Portuondo's sonic atmosphere exploring home and exile, the work's sound reverberates in the viewer's body. The sound of the "pop" vibrates between signifying bringing flesh/bodies together and love, as well as ripping it/them apart and indiscriminate hate. Cassils said *103 Shots* was meant to "complicate the discourse at the time about safety, precarity and show a means of finding your joy in the midst of trauma" (Steinbock 2018, p. 120). Cassils' work explores how joy and pain are strange bedfellows and that precarity, which I experienced myself as I described above, is a part of joy rather than being apart from it. If I could turn back the clock, I would have nuanced trans joy in this way for my students during the trauma of the Club Q shooting.

8. Trans Joy as World-Making and World-Unmaking

So many of the visual diaries presented in my class were terrific examples of how my students carved out spaces for themselves as acts of lived trans world-making. One of the ones I remember most clearly is a diary of self-portraits one student made through photography that depicted in their words "black femme/butch trans lives". Tyler is an art school, so many of my students were artists who often shared their artworks in their visual diaries. As the semester went on, the students became more and more comfortable with each other and shared an array of inspirational examples of how they were living joyously. One student noted, "I am so used to feeling scared or on guard that my classmate's visual presentations... gave me permission to be happy. I'm leaving this class in a much better place than when I arrived". While I will theorize a more critical take on joy—one that is vibratory between world-making and world-unmaking—this section is not meant to cast a skeptical eye on these visual diaries. Instead, I want to reiterate that theorizing joy, as I have done in the last two sections and will do in this one, is different than thinking about trans joy in the classroom.

While the works of Erika Diamond, the other artist in the panel discussion with Duncan-Portuondo and Cassils, do not have sound, they manifest a felt vibration between world-making and world-unmaking, the final characteristic of trans joy I examine.²¹ I focus first on their *Imminent Peril—Queer Collection* series (2018–23) (Figure 5).

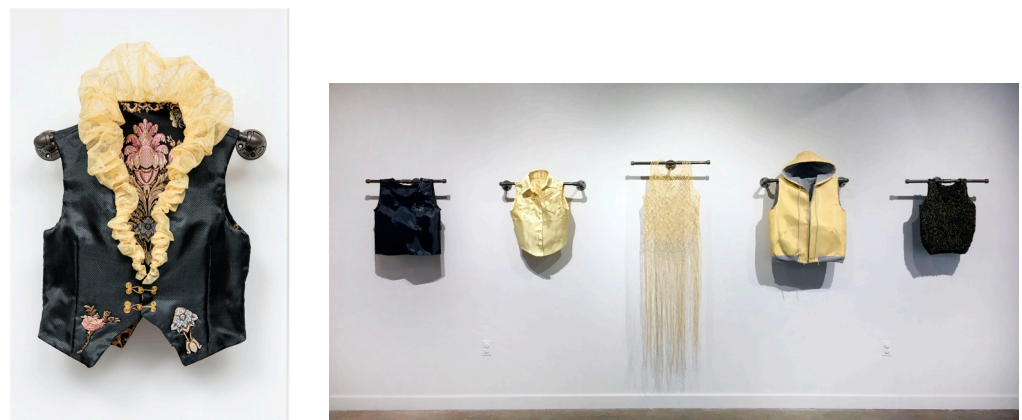


Figure 5. (Left) Erika Diamond, *MB Vest* (from *Imminent Peril Queer Collection* series), Kevlar fabric, fabric lining, Kevlar chopped mat collar, embroidery, and applique, 2020. Photo: Terry Brown; (right) Erika Diamond, *Imminent Peril Queer Collection* at McColl Center for Visual Art. North Carolina. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Their collection is composed of exquisitely crafted clothing made of the unlikeliest of materials: poly-paraphenylene terephthalamide (PPT or K29), also known by the brand name Kevlar, a component of personal armor such as combat hats, ballistic face masks, and bulletproof vests.²² Kevlar, not surprisingly, is tough and, therefore, not easy to work with, although you would not know this by looking at Diamond's work. Each work was

made for a specific individual in Diamond's community of queer friends. The short text accompanying the garments includes a few facts about the people for whom they are made and the artist's relationship with them. For instance, here is the text that appears alongside one of the works:

MB Vest is a vest tailor-made to fit and protect Michael-Birch, a true leader within the LGBTQ+ community of Richmond [Virginia]. They are courageous, stylish, a talented textile artist, and super fun! They prefer an aesthetic of gender non-conformity. The reversible vest appears to sparkle from behind the black Kevlar, and the dramatic high collar is constructed with a tulle-like fabric made of chopped Kevlar fiber.²³

Diamond's work expresses their love and desire to celebrate the lives of non-gender conforming individuals in the present as a foil for the narrative portraits we hear and read about in media only *after* queers are killed or hurt. During the panel, they noted that their work was a "refusal" to focus on narratives of death.

Returning to Diamond's work, there is a palpable tension between the material Diamond uses—bulletproof Kevlar—chosen to reflect the violent world queer and trans subjects live in—and their visual presentation as high-end fashion that obscures that particular reality and glimpses a more convivial future one. The clothes are also displayed in galleries as objects, but not to be touched or one imagines even worn—at least not yet. The works function more as disembodied images in the here and now that can be imagined as protective clothing for bodies in the then and there. If, per José Esteban Muñoz, "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing," and that it "is essentially about the rejection of a here and now", then perhaps transness in these works is more accurately a felt vibration between here and now and then and there, forever becoming (Muñoz 2009, p. 1).

The vibration of another kind—the one between world-unmaking and world-making that it the chief concern of this section—can be felt in Diamond's 2022 works, *In(Visibility) hoodie* and *#Saygay*, a backpack, (Figure 6), both made in response to the increasing number of bills proposed in American state legislatures, where public schools have become the front line for anti-trans bills. In the last two years, 306 bills targeting trans youth have been introduced, roughly 15% of which have passed (Nakajima and Jin 2022). The title of Diamond's backpack, *#SayGay*, references the movement against a controversial Florida law that opponents have dubbed "Don't Say Gay". The hoodie and backpack play with the heightened visibility of trans youth that such bills have engendered in schools. The hoodie is cleverly lined with what Jo-Ann Fabrics describes as "ombre rainbow pride celebration fabric". The wearer can privately enjoy being protectively wrapped up in the warmth of pride colors. Banned books can be placed in the book bag—even "queer secrets", which Diamond indicates is one of the materials of the work.²⁴ Both items are made from reflective vinyl fabric. On the one hand, it could be said that it maintains a wearer's right not to be known because as light bounces off its shiny surface, it momentarily occludes the visibility of anyone looking at the person donning the hoodie and backpack. Indeed, Glissant argues that the condition of "globality" (a term he mobilizes to get away from the neoimperialism embedded in the word "globalization") is predicated on citizens having the right to opacity or not to be unknown. This flies in the face of how the West operates. As the wearer moves, the fabric shimmers, further preventing embodied visibility. Nevertheless, the fabric is also highly visible—especially from afar. Therefore, it calls attention to itself, possibly the wrong kind of attention. In this way, the works manifest a tenuous affective vibration between world-making and world-unmaking.



Figure 6. (Left) Erika Diamond, *In(Visibility) hoodie*, 2022. Photo: Echard Wheeler; (right) Erika Diamond, *#Saygay*, 2022. Photo courtesy of artist.

9. Teaching between Here and Now and Then and There

Diamond's work is in dialogue with the political climate of Florida, and I want to segue into teaching transgender studies meets art history in the here and now—broadly in the political environment of the United States—and what this class might look like in the then and there. For a decade before arriving at Temple in 2021, I taught at Florida International University, the state's only public university in Miami. What I could not have known is that shortly after arriving at Temple, the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, began an assault on diversity and equity initiatives that would have made my research and teaching interests in queer and trans theory as well as critical race theory, which the extreme conservative American right has politicized, incredibly problematic.²⁵ The governor has signed bills such as SB122 that would prevent expenditures for any state university direct-support institutions towards organizations that "[a]dvocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, or promote or engage in political or social activism, as defined by rules of the State Board of Education and regulations of the Board of Governors" ([Florida State Senate 2023](#)). At the same time, schools could now accept funds from organizations discriminating against "gender". In fact, the word "gender" was removed from the list of protected classes and substituted with the word "sex". FIU is the nation's largest Hispanic-serving institution, which makes the governor's attacks particularly troubling. I still have many colleagues, friends, and former students who live in South Florida. A friend emailed that "I dodged a bullet" by having left Florida. While I initially thought of this as a metaphor, the reality is that teachers at all levels *literally* have had, are having, and will have to dodge bullets. I have two nieces—one enrolled in elementary school and another in high school—in central Florida, where I grew up.²⁶

All that to say I do not take for granted that I could teach transgender studies meets art history. When I teach this class in the future, I want to take the lessons I learned through my artistic, scholarly, and curatorial research of trans joy and bring them back into the classroom. In particular, I argue that art historical pedagogy and practice can be thought of as enabling trans joy that pivots between multiplicity and one, belonging and unbelonging, world-making and world-unmaking, and other dipoles yet to be articulated. To expand on this point, I turn to the robust and compelling conversations about "worldmaking" by art historians Ming Tiampo and Monica Juneja ([Tiampo 2024](#); [Juneja 2018](#)). Martin Heidegger has famously argued that artworks are constitutive of worlds ([Heidegger 1964](#)). At the same time, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial critique of his worlding suggests—as Tiampo puts it—"is the potential force of conquest, decimating Indigenous

life worlds” (Spivak 1986; Tiampo 2024). Tiampo mobilizes Pheng Cheah’s shift from thinking of worlding as less a spatial and more of a temporal category to argue that art history can make worlds through a constant process of deworlding and reworlding (Cheah 2016; Tiampo 2024).²⁷ Moreover, Juneja writes, “Art history as a form of world-making . . . is dependent on the criticality of a transcultural approach to rethink its epistemic foundations” (Juneja 2018).²⁸ She further notes that the “trans” in transculturalism brings into relief the notion that “culture” has often been understood through a nationalistic framework and thereby exists “in tension with the unruly and contradictory trends generated by mobility”. Tiampo’s understanding of an art historical practice that both deworlds and reworlds, along with Juneja’s approach that it is both with and beyond the nation, meaningfully intersects with the vibratory quality of trans joy concerned with LGBTQ+ communities that I have theorized. Indeed, bringing together the works of Duncan-Portuondo, Cassils, and Diamond not only helps conceptualize the nuances of trans joy (an investigation prompted by my students) but also exemplifies what an art historical practice that brings into being trans joy might look like.

Besides exploring trans joy and “trans” as a concept more broadly to theorize syllabi connected to a transgender studies class in art history, a primary concern of this essay is that a lot of lip service is paid to the idea that pedagogy and research are connected. However, more reflection is needed on this, especially since academic journals linked to the discipline of art history are largely biased against any theorizing of pedagogy. Finally, rather than offering a syllabus, I wanted to share my experiences teaching this class, which is rare in our discipline. A corollary to this point that is more implicit is that we need to have more frank conversations about pedagogy and identity, especially if we are truly going to expand the demographic of those teaching the discipline and those taking our classes and who participate in art-making and joy.

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Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to the special issue editors for inviting me to participate in this special issue and to the three peer reviewers whose comments have greatly enhanced this essay. I am especially thankful to Derek Conrad Murray, without whose unwavering support this article would surely not have been published, as I describe shortly. Finally, I thank the 2023-24 cohort of Temple University’s Center for Humanities (CHAT) fellows who provided crucial feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.
- ² The French philosopher Roland Barthes, in his “autobiographical” sketch, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1977), rigorously refused to revert to an underlying reality or essence by revealing the construction of subjectivity, itself, as a product of language: “This book consists of what I do not know: the unconscious and ideology, things which utter themselves only by the voices of others. I cannot put on stage (in the text), *as such*, the symbolic and the ideological which pass through me, since I am their blind spot”. (p. 152. Emphasis in original).
- ³ The quotes are from the “aims” section of the journal. See <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/arts/about> (accessed on 5 June 2024).
- ⁴ There are many resources for anyone who wants to learn about the nuances of the term “transgender”, including the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), <https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions> (accessed on 5 June 2024), and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation’s (GLADD) glossary, <https://glaad.org/reference/trans-terms/> (accessed on 5 June 2024). The purpose of this essay is not to define “trans”, but to think about what it does alongside and through my pedagogy and research.
- ⁵ Being careful not to conflate civil rights in US with trans rights, I want to note that as far back as 1979, writer and Black studies scholar Nick Aaron Ford wrote the following about his thoughts on white instructors teaching courses on black studies in the instruction manual to his anthology, *Black Insights: Significant Literature by Black Americans—1760 to the Present* (1971): “. . . teachers who are qualified academically, emotionally, and sympathetically (lack of conscious or unconscious race prejudice). . . must be encouraged and even urged to accept such assignments” (Emphasis in original; Ford 1974, p. 23).
- ⁶ Getsy wrote the first single-authored book in the field of art history concerned with transgender studies’ relation to the discipline. Ace Lehner and Amelia Jones edited special journal issues on trans visual culture and trans-ing performance, respectively.

The authors have provided a lengthy introduction in which they discuss their syllabus's content, form, and goals in more detail. See (Getsy and Gossett 2021). Full disclosure: I was on the editorial board (2020–24; chair, 2022–24) of *Art Journal*, the flagship journal of the College Art Association, the discipline's main organizational body in the United States. However, the editorial board makes no decisions regarding the journal's content.

Jack Halberstam's recent connection of architecture to the trans body concerning his analysis of the work of Gordon Matta Clark (Halberstam 2018) is an inspiration for this line of thinking. Worth noting, too, is that the first sentence of a related article of his that focuses on ruins begins with a nod to the fact that he is teaching a class on "Worlds End", so one imagines his research was probably impacted by conversations in class. (Halberstam 2022).

The work's title can be roughly translated from Tagalog as "creature" or "create", with the *ex* from Latin meaning "out of" and "out from". The title references folkloric beings in the artwork and the provocative notion that the often-maligned creature in most mythological traditions can be a creator rather than a destroyer. I shared the following article where I wrote about their work (Patel 2019).

I shared articles I wrote about Pu's work (Patel 2017; Patel 2021a).

I shared an essay with the student about my own experience of smelling samosas at a queer of-color dance party in England that triggered memories that I do not typically associate with queer spaces (Patel 2015).

Regarding temporality concerning trans, see also (Amin 2014).

Along with the Heidelberg University team of Worlding Public Cultures: The Arts and Social Innovation, Tiampo and Hopfener organized a workshop titled "Worlding Art History through Syllabi", 10–11 October 2023, Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin, <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/worlding-art-history-through-syllabi/> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

See his website, which he began in 2015: <https://kleavercruz.com/the-black-joy-project> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

Call for papers was found on the University of Pennsylvania's English department website outlining opportunities for students: <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2023/02/25/nwsa-trans-joy> (accessed 5 May 2024).

The zine can be found on Stella, a virtual satellite gallery of the Stella Elkins Tyler Gallery at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University: <https://www.stellaonline.art/what-does-trans-do> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

See also my article (Patel 2021b).

Link to images of the exhibition including altar can be found through this link on my website: <https://www.alpeshkpatel.com/multiple-and-one-exhibition> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

I met Zac during the summer of 2019 as a mentor at Chautauqua School of Art. Incidentally, they took a workshop with me, where I utilized the visual diary methodology. We both grew up in Florida: I was part of a South Asian family, and they were part of a white Evangelical family. Somehow, we both survived! For more information on Zac, see: <http://www.zacthompsonart.com> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

Artist website: <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-103-shots> (accessed on 5 June 2024). See also performance studies scholar and Cassil's artistic collaborator Julia Steinmetz's excellent essay on this work (Steinmetz 2016).

Works can be viewed on the artist's website at <https://www.erikadiamond.com/#/imminent-peril-queer-collection> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

Kevlar is a registered trademark of Dupont: <https://www.dupont.com/brands/kevlar.html> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

Information provided by artist.

Three of the most frequent LGBTQ titles to be banned include (Evison 2019; Kobabe 2022; G. Johnson 2020). One Florida school board member went so far as to file a criminal report with the police when he discovered that schools in his district carried Johnson's book, a memoir of the author's experience growing up as a black queer person. He claimed the book violated the state's obscenity laws (Nakajima and Jin 2022).

In the previous section, I gestured to this above when I discussed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. In May 2023, the governor expanded on this. See Human Rights Campaign (HRC). 2023. Gov. DeSantis Signs Slate of Extreme Anti-LGBTQ+ Bills, Enacting a Record-Shattering Number of Discriminatory Measures Into Law. Press release, May 17. Available online: <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/gov-desantis-signs-slate-of-extreme-anti-lgbtq-bills-enacting-a-record-shattering-number-of-discriminatory-measures-into-law> (accessed on 5 May 2024).

As of April 2024, 11 states allow students at colleges and universities to carry arms. Another 21 states, including Pennsylvania and Florida, leave the decision to each university (Rock 2024). Only 16 states do not allow teachers to carry firearms (Orton 2024).

See also Tiampo's book series "Worlding Public Cultures", Institute of Cultural Inquiry Berlin Press; and the website of the "Worlding Public Cultures project" (2019–2022), of which Tiampo was a part: <https://www.worldingcultures.org> (accessed on 5 June 2024).

See also (Juneja 2023).

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