Emergence: Toward a “State of the Field” Trans Studies Conference

### 1. Title: Emergence: Toward a “State of the Field” Trans Studies Conference

**Abstract:** Our project is to begin work on an interdisciplinary conference concerning the state of the emergent field of trans studies. Because trans studies is an "interdiscipline,” its scholars come to similar questions from vastly different methodological and disciplinary orientations. At the Watson Conference and beyond, we hope to provide space to (re)orient these disparate approaches around questions of field formation, animated by a commitment to trans life. We’re looking for participants who share this commitment to trans life and situate their work within trans studies. At the Watson Conference, we plan to co-create a statement of purpose and values for our trans studies conference, panel ideas and CFPs, plans for conference infrastructure and funding, a leadership structure and division of labor for continued work after the Watson Conference, and a projection of future work beyond our proposed trans studies conference, tentatively slated for Summer 2025.

### 2. Facilitator information:

Evangeline Thurston Wilder

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Evangeline Thurston Wilder is a PhD student in English Literary Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is interested in the intersection of DIY trans literary production, the emergent field of trans studies, and trans feelings and bodies. Previously, her work has investigated trans and Indigenous temporalities, lowbrow literary production, and the political efficacy of affect. She is worried about the institutionalization of trans knowledge and tries to bring trans experience and academic ways of knowing together in her work.

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Gabriel Fiandeiro is a third year PhD student at University of Wisconsin, Madison and received their undergraduate degree from UC Berkeley in 2020, where they concentrated on modernist literature and comics studies. Currently, they focus on pedagogic forms and aesthetics in queer and trans experimental work. More broadly, they are interested in thinking at the intersection of queer, feminist, and trans theory. They also co-lead UW Madison’s Americanist Colloquium, where they highlight queer and trans texts and thinkers. They bring to this project an engagement with trans pedagogical spaces and a commitment to investing in/approaching the field from outside of a binary trans perspective.

### 3. Primary Contact:

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### 4. Description (please include a Works Cited):

We propose to use the collaborative space of the Watson Conference to begin the work on an eventual trans studies conference. Our proposed trans studies conference is interested specifically in raising and answering questions about the state of the emergent field of trans studies. We want to have conversations around the public spaces that trans studies has and should take up in academia (teaching, learning, theorizing). We see the Watson Conference as a first iteration of that trans space–which is itself absolutely invaluable.

We are responding in part to two essays with the same name: TJ Billard et al.’s 2022 “Whither Trans Studies?” in the inaugural issue of the *Bulletin of Applied Trans Studies* and Kadji Amin's 2023 essay, "Whither Trans Studies?" in *Trans Studies Quarterly*. These essays, coming out less than a year apart, ask the same question with different methodological approaches. The *BATS* essay is a mission statement for the new journal, which focuses more on social science approaches to trans studies. The authors repeatedly call for a “pragmatic” trans studies, which departs from the literary studies-inflected humanities approach of *TSQ*. Amin’s *TSQ* essay also departs from *TSQ*’s past abstract, theoretical approaches to trans studies, but remains squarely within the humanities. Amin, following Andrea Long Chu’s call, argues that the field of trans studies needs to recenter trans life in its scholarship, though Amin does not call for a turn to the “pragmatic.” Both of these essays are directly and indirectly in conversation with ongoing disputes within trans studies about who, and what, the field is for (See Chu and Drager, 2019, “After Trans Studies” and Adair et al., 2020, “Before Trans Studies”).

This series of essays forms a snapshot of a key "fight" in trans studies and also makes clear the stakes of this fight: trans life itself is inseparable from and foundational to trans studies as a field. We propose that “trans life” might be a uniting ethos that can animate “pragmatic,” theoretical, and “post-disciplinary” (Billard et al. 3) trans studies scholarship. Our project starts from the conviction that (re)focusing on trans life across disciplines can unite these disparate approaches and produce a solid foundation for the field moving forward.

Our project takes this fight seriously, and suggests that now is the right time to bring these "fights" beyond the pages of journal articles and into the shared space of an academic conference, where "fighting" and "sharing space in solidarity together" can be one and the same activity. Though there have been a small handful of interdisciplinary trans studies conferences, the last one that specifically addressed the state of the field was the University of Arizona’s “Trans\*Studies Conference” in 2016. The 2016 conference was held in association with *Trans Studies Quarterly*, notably before any of the above fights occurred. Clearly, it did not resolve all the questions the field needs to ask itself now. Our trans studies conference should continue the work of *TSQ* even as it departs from it slightly, suggesting that true interdisciplinarity might require something more than what *TSQ* has offered us so far. Because trans studies is an "interdiscipline," its scholars come to the same questions from vastly different methodological and disciplinary orientations. Our work at the Watson Conference and beyond is to create spaces for these questions of field formation to be discussed across otherwise difficult to bridge disciplinary divides.

Trans studies is, in part, in a rhetorical bind: what kind of work do we say we do? How do we position the field? What makes it different from Gender and Women's Studies or Queer Studies or even Literary Studies, the fields that have incubated it until it very recently began to gain acceptance in universities? We thus situate trans studies as a potential site for counter-rhetorics, especially given that political speech is leading directly to trans death. Every year breaks the previous year’s record for murdered trans women. 583 anti-trans bills have been introduced in state legislatures in 2023 alone, of which 85 have passed. If trans studies is to answer Amin’s call to return trans life to the center of our scholarly inquiry, we must address the intersection of rhetorical and physical violence which haunts trans life today. We hope to use both the space of the Watson Conference and our eventual trans studies conference to foreground the urgent need to unite speech and action, scholarship and showing up.

Our project is animated by the following questions: What is gained from providing a physical trans space that might allow for the transmission of trans thought that does not happen as monads in our individual institutions and disciplines? In other words, what can a conference do? Who might be excluded by virtue of the space we're trying to create, and what is lost in that exclusion? What is the value of an academic field in the first place? What new fields of thought might be produced through this disciplinary cross-fertilization? If successful, our Watson Conference sessions will form an initial mini-version of the kinds of interdisciplinary conversations (or, even, fights!) we hope to host at our trans studies conference.

Works Cited

Adair, Cassius, et al. “Before Trans Studies.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* vol. 7, no. 3, 2020, pp. 306-320. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8552922.

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### 5. Annotated schedule:

#### Day 1: Thursday, March 7, 2024

Day 1, Session 1: 11:15-1:00

* **11:15-11:20: Brief mindfulness activity**
  + We will integrate mindfulness/centering activities (such as breathing exercises, body scans, movement/stretching) into our sessions in order to invite each participant to “arrive” into the space and to feel each other’s presence before beginning. This is a purposeful pedagogical move that, if successful, will allow participants (and facilitators!) to slow down, let go of nervous energy, and center themselves before proceeding with this exciting work.
* **11:20-11:35: Introductions**
  + Names and pronouns, where’re you from? (5 Minutes)
    - Everyone introduces themselves before moving to part 2
  + Partner Activity: “Where do you know from?” (10 Minutes)
    - We will circulate a modified version of Eugenia Zuroski’s “Where do you know from?” (<https://maifeminism.com/where-do-you-know-from-an-exercise-in-placing-ourselves-together-in-the-classroom/>) for participants to reflect on prior to the conference.
    - This will be brief, but will allow us to learn each other’s names, pronouns, and experience (including disciplinary background). Because we anticipate productive disagreement in the course of our collaborative work, we want to begin by ensuring every participant can recognize the values they share with other participants and to learn what their co-participants bring to the table.
* **11:35-11:45: What are we doing here (Evangeline and Gabriel)**
  + Who are we?
  + Why this, why now?
  + Outline for the weekend
* **11:45-12:15: Opening Activity**
  + Each participant shares what their own discipline brings to trans studies, while facilitators write notes on the board: (30 minutes)
    - What are your investments in your own disciplinary background?
    - What does your discipline excel at?
    - What does your discipline struggle to do/think regarding trans studies?
    - How has your discipline shaped what you need from the new trans space we’re working toward?
* **12:15-12:30: Break**
* **12:30-1:00: Preparatory Reading Discussion**
  + Get on the same page on the field/direction of trans studies:
    - How did people respond to 3 different approaches to potential crises in trans studies as a field?
  + What are the key issues that this conference must address?
    - Which provocations from the authors should we be addressing? What would we add to their conversation?

Day 1, Session (2-5)

* **2:00-2:05: Reintroduction and brief movement activity**
* **2:05-2:30: Big group brainstorm: Conference infrastructure**
  + Include: What should a “finished” (recognizing that it may not be complete) conference infrastructure plan look like by the end of our weekend?
* **2:30-2:55: Big group brainstorm: Founding document & values and purposes**
  + What should a “finished” (recognizing that it may not be complete) Founding Document look like by the end of our weekend?
* **2:55-3:00: Assign Subgroups**
  + Share plan for final 2 hours
* **3:00-3:15: Break**
* **3:15-4:15: Small group work session**
  + Break into 2 subgroups which will have special responsibility for 2 aspects of project: one for conference infrastructure [space, place, timeline, funding, speakers], one for statement of values and purpose (based on big-group discussion).
    - These groups will build upon the collaboratively generated ideas in the first part of the session. The goal of each group should be to take the big group’s ideas and expand upon them, shaping them into the agreed-upon format.
* **4:15-4:30: Break**
* **4:30-4:50: Sharing Back**
  + -Subgroups share back, combine consensus ideas and output on shared document,
* **4:50-5:00: Regroup/Reflect/Invision**
  + Together create active list of open questions/unresolved issues/places that need more work, discuss final day deliverables

#### Day 2: Friday, March 8, 2023

Day 2, Session 1: 9:00-12:00

* **9:00-9:15 Breakfast & Gathering** 
  + We don’t expect people to finish eating in these 15 minutes; the activities for the next hour are structured with the expectation that people can continue to snack on their breakfast while we chat and work.
* **9:15-9:20: Brief mindfulness activity**
* **9:20-9:45: Reflection**
  + 10 min- small group (3-4 people) reflection on yesterday
    - What worked? What didn’t? What are our leftover questions and untied-up threads from our final discussion yesterday? What should we shift/prioritize today?
  + 15 min- big group share back
* **9:45-10:30: Big group discussion: Specific panel wants/needs**
  + In our ideal world, what panels do we want to see at the conference? What might a successful panel look like and include? How might we structure panels to allow for and encourage cross-disciplinary conversation?
* **10:30-10:45: Break**
* **10:45-11:30: Big group discussion: Future & after the conference**
  + What do we need in trans studies?
  + Timeline beyond first conference, leadership structure per thing, series
* **11:30-12:00: Wrap-up & reflections**
  + Concrete discussion and collective decision making about final day deliverables

Day 2, Session 2: 1:00-4:00

* **1:00-1:05: Brief movement activity**
  + Re-center and re-focus
* **1:05-1:30: Big group brainstorm: CFP Language and Founders Panel**
  + Include: Take our conversations from panel production and figure out what central terms for our CFP must include and which panels should be foreground as Founders Panels.
* **1:30-1:55: Big group brainstorm: Conference infrastructure 2.0**
  + -Include: timeline to first conference, specific actions that need to be taken in order to make the conference, reflect on leadership structure
* **1:55-2:00: Assign Subgroups**
  + **Share plan for final 2 hours**
* **2:00-2:10: Break**
* **2:10-3:00: Small group work**
  + One group works on conference infrastructure 2.0
    - Timeline to first conference, specific actions that need to be taken, typing up leadership structure document
  + One group works on language for the large scale CFP (from Founding Document)
    - This will also involve researching previous conferences’ CFPs and produce a framework to teach everyone about the structure of CFPs
  + Both groups take elements from big group discussions and expand and format them to produce final deliverables
* **3:00-3:10: Break**
* **3:10-4:00: Share back & produce deliverables** 
  + A mix between sharing back and then returning to small groups/large group for presentations.
  + Concretize division of labor for finalizing deliverables for Day 3’s 90 minute prep session

#### Day 3: Saturday, March 9, 2023

Day 3, Final Session: 9-10:30

* **9:00-9:15: Get breakfast & gather**
* **9:15-9:20: Brief mindfulness activity**
* **9:20-9:35: Reflection on previous two days**
  + What worked? What didn’t? What are our big takeaways from this weekend? What are we excited to share?
* **9:35-9:45: Presentation Focus**
  + Get on same page about what needs to be done before presentation
* **9:45-10:15: Flex Time** 
  + Small groups finish deliverables for presentation, tying up loose ends.
* **10:15-10:30: Wrap-ups, thank-yous, final mindfulness activity.**

### 6. Modality:

In-person

### 7. Number of participants:

15-20

### 8. Participant background:

We’re looking for participants who situate their work within the emergent field of trans studies. Participants should be comfortable with and conversant in trans studies problems, methods, and discourses. Interdisciplinarity is central to our project, so we foreground disciplinary diversity in our call for participants. We welcome people from all experience levels and academic positions, including graduate students, professors, and independent scholars/researchers.

Because we can represent a literary studies background, we especially welcome trans scholars with expertise in quantitative and qualitative research methods. A good participant in our project would be a researcher who takes a trans approach to their work, rather than merely studying trans subjects. If our project is successful, it will include and center voices from trans of Color studies, trans disability studies, Indigenous trans studies, and intersex studies. Below, we have a (representative but not exhaustive) list of disciplinary backgrounds that we would like to have in the room with us during the conference.

* Humanities/Social Sciences
* Natural/Physical Sciences
* Political Science/Theory
* Sound/Visual Studies
* Geography/Spatiality
* History
* People with Trans Pedagogy Expertise
* People with Conference Organizing Expertise

### 9. Preparation:

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### In order to get a sense of the current problems and questions in trans studies that our project seeks to intervene in, participants should read the following connected pieces from *TSQ: Trans Studies Quarterly* and the *Bulletin of Applied Trans Studies*. We are also asking our participants to read the 2021 Watson Conference Commitments to accessibility, inclusion, and diversity in advance of the conference.

[2021 Watson Conference Commitments](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/history-and-conference-archive/conference-archive/past-conferences/2021-watson-conference/2021-watson-conference-commitments)

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Amin, Kadji. “Whither Trans Studies?: A Field at a Crossroads.”*TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* vol. 10, no. 1, 2023, pp. 54-58. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-10273224.

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Beyond this, much of our work will take place at the conference. Participants are welcome but not required to come with questions, ideas, and problems they’d like to address collectively. One example of this might be an idea for a panel where they could share trans studies work that does not fit into existing academic avenues for presentation. Another might be a key problem for the field of trans studies, such as the place of nonbinary thought and work, which should be addressed at our eventual conference.

### 10. Final-day deliverable:

* Statement of purpose and values for our eventual trans studies conference
* Working list of questions and draft language for call for papers for the conference
* Working list of panels we would specifically like to have at the conference
* List of potential spaces for the conference and contacts to pursue
* List of potential funding sources for conference
* Leadership structure for the conference
* Division of labor for continued work on the conference
* List of other potential collaborators on this project
* Rough timeline for future work on the conference–when would we like the conference to take place, and how will we get there?
* Rough projection of future work beyond this conference–is this a series of special topic conferences with different themes? The infrastructure for an annual conference? A special issue of a journal?

### 11. How will participants get credit?

* “Founders’ Panels” opportunities at the conference
* Recognized as founders in conference CFP, program
* Can list founding the conference in CV
* Priority for leadership roles for future iterations of this conference
* A discussion of leadership structure and the project’s future is built into our scheduled time for the weekend; this will include a discussion of “credit” to loop in participants’ voices.

### 12. What happens after the conference?

* Our first big deliverable after this conference is the creation of a full conference, tentatively slated for Summer 2025.
  + We recognize that this will certainly require more work than can be done in one weekend. We will use the Watson Conference as a launching point, from which we will continue work on the trans studies conference with our participants as collaborators.
    - We will have an open discussion about the leadership structure of this conference during our time at the Watson Conference.
    - We plan to create a listserv, WhatsApp group, or some other mode of relatively informal communication to continue our work beyond the Watson Conference. We will also establish at least quarterly Zoom meetings.
* Part of our infrastructure for the weekend includes leaving at least partially open the question of the future. We look forward to hearing our participants’ ideas and goals for future collaboration. Because of this, a discussion of future collaboration is built into our schedule on Day 2, Session 1.
* During our discussions on future plans, we are going to suggest a number of different avenues that we could pursue beyond the first trans studies conference:
  + Do we want to turn this conference that focuses on the field of trans studies into a conference series, as a continual check in and growth on the field.
    - Central to this might be the production of some kind of society that runs the conference, which would require its own leadership structure.
  + Do we want to produce a special issue of one of the trans oriented journals that commemorates conversations had at this conference? We would consider pitching this to TSQ or The Bulletin for Applied Trans Studies.
    - Would this work better as a collected anthology?

### 13. Working and learning environment:

* We are committed to embracing the Watson Conference Commitments for inclusive and accessible conference sessions. Because of this, we are requiring that everyone read the 2021 Watson Conference Commitments as part of the preparatory reading. In addition to that, we are considering the following elements to enhance the accessibility, anti-racism, and inclusion of our sessions:
* We will begin each session with a brief guided meditation or mindfulness exercise. These are intended to invite participants to center themselves and feel each other’s presence before beginning conversation.
  + We have included breaks throughout our schedule to allow for rest and reset time.
* We are implementing for all major decisions and generation activities a system where we discuss the question as a large group and then break into small groups, before returning to the large group to report back, to make sure all voices are heard and considered as a collective and in smaller collaboration. This functions as a double vetting process.
  + In addition, we have check-ins built into our schedule to invite open discussion of what has occurred and been accomplished at each stage of the weekend. These will look like, “What went right, what went wrong, what’s missing, what’s exciting?” conversations.
* We are focusing on trans life, but central to our project is acknowledging and including the forms of life contained under this umbrella, from nonbinary identities, to embodied intersex identities, and culturally situated gendered identity like Two-Spirit.
  + There is, consequently, the obvious expectation that people respect each other’s names, pronouns, privacy and dignity. We will provide spaces for people to make those elements clear in our introductions and reintroductions.
  + Given our focus on academic field formation around trans identity, we will foreground conversations about the right to obscurity. As we study trans life, what components do we want to protect in order to allow for flightlines of joy, life, and safety that would be compromised through the invasive nature of academic study.
* Part of our conversations about our future conference (under “conference infrastructure” in annotated schedule) will include discussions of equity, diversity, inclusion and access at our future trans studies conference.
* We are having open discussion on leadership roles, where we will take seriously the requirement to foreground a diversity in gendered, racial, and ethnic perspectives and focuses.

### 14. (IN-PERSON PROPOSALS ONLY) Space and material needs:

We would like a space with access to either a whiteboard, blackboard, and/or (ideally) a Smartboard to work out ideas together. We would also benefit from the ability to break into small groups at certain times, so a room with easily moveable chairs and/or tables would be preferable. We will also need whiteboard markers, post-its, and paper for drafting.