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Over the course of my lifetime, I have called myself or been called a variety of names: queer, lesbian, dyke, butch, transgender, stone, and transgender butch, just for starters. Indeed, one day when I was walking along the street with a butch friend, we were called faggots! If I had known the term “transgender” when I was a teenager in the 1970s, I am sure I would have grabbed hold of it like a life jacket on rough seas, but there were no such words in my world. Changing sex for me and for many people my age was a fantasy, a dream, and because it had nothing to do with our realities, we had to work around this impossibility and create a home for ourselves in bodies that were not comfortable or right. The term “wrong body” was used often in the 1980s, even becoming the name of a BBC show about transsexuality, and, offensive as the term might sound now, it at least harbored an explanation for how cross-gendered people might experience embodiment: I, at least, felt as if I was in the wrong body, and there seemed to be no way out.

At the time when I came out in 1980, some white feminists were waging war on transsexuals, whom they saw as interlopers into spaces that women had fought hard to protect from men. I remember attending a feminist theory workshop while I was in graduate school at which cisgender feminists wanted to do “gender checks” on people attending the workshop to make sure that no “men in drag” tried to infiltrate the meetings. Separatism was a thing, and women’s bookstores and coffee shops and bars organized around a very narrow politics of womanhood. Within such a climate, it was hard to express my butchness at all, and even as I embraced the sense of community that feminism offered me, I felt confused by the emphasis on *womanhood*. In the end, I had to part ways with this version of feminism in order to embrace my masculinity, and it took a long time for me find my way back to a meaningful relation with gender politics.

For my part, I now prefer the term “trans*” because it holds open the meaning of the term and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming. The asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender-variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations.

Though these past two decades have given us better terms for who we are, they have done less than one might hope to heal the vexed relationship between trans* activism and theory, on the one hand, and feminist activism and theory, on the other. Indeed, last year’s important Women’s March on Washington was plagued by accusations of transphobia. This year, as a consequence, people are forgoing the pink “Pussy Hats” that came to symbolize that march and acknowledging that the emphasis on “pussy” – despite its ironic and playful inflection here – excluded transwomen who may not have

conventionally female genitalia. This rift, last year's march showed, presents a real problem for the contemporary political alliances that are so desperately needed now in a time of extended crisis.

In what follows, I review some of the lesser-told history of alliances between feminists and trans* folk. Through this I arrive at the suggestion that contemporary trans* theory needs to reset the terms of the debate: rather than remaining invested in an identitarian set of conflicts that turn on small differences and individual hurts, let us rather wage battle against the violent imposition of economic disparity and forcefully oppose a renewed and open investment in white supremacy and American imperial ambition transacted through the channels of globalization.

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A strand of 1970s anti-trans* white feminism, which found its loudest voice in Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), accounts for the origins of much of the contemporary suspicion of feminism within trans* groups. Raymond's book was a deeply transphobic text, full of paranoid accusations about transsexual women invading and populating "womyn's space." The language of empire in her title referred to the way in which she understood transsexual women to be literally invading, even "raping," female-born women. But she also, contradictorily, blamed transsexual women for being complicit in the production and consolidation of conventional femininity.

However, the sentiments that Raymond expressed in *The Transsexual Empire* were representative of only a fairly small—albeit vocal and powerful—group of women in the 1970s, which also included Sheila Jeffreys and Mary Daly. Tragically, this antipathy between some second-wave feminists and trans*women has significantly contoured the terrain of contemporary trans* activism, presenting a stumbling block for coalition building in the United States. It has come at the expense of embracing the many radical feminists from the 1970s and 1980s, such as Andrea Dworkin, who did not see trans* women as enemies, who understood the category of "woman" to include trans* women and even in some cases advocated for free hormones and surgery.

To gain a more complete picture of what less famous feminists felt about trans* people a few decades ago, we can turn to the archive of 1970s and '80s women's magazines. It may come as a surprise to many that, in a quick survey of commentary on trans* topics in some of the feminist zines and publications gathered in the One Institute Archives in Los Angeles, I found multiple issues of journals dedicated to trans* experiences.

In a 1973 issue of the Brooklyn-based journal *Echo of Sappho*, for example, we find several articles on gender transition, including a letter from someone who identified himself as a "female to male transsexual" and who suggested that the magazine "leans a little too hard on men." The issue also includes a piece titled "The Nature and Treatment of Transsexualism: When a Woman Becomes a Man" by one Mike Curie. This piece discusses the privileges and advantages of becoming a man but concludes: "I enjoy my status as a male, yet I realize that I don't have to prove my maleness by getting laid by

women. I consider women my equals and hope to become a man who does not oppress them.” On the next page begins an article titled “WHY WOMEN WANT TO BECOME MEN _____ AND ONE WHO DID _____!!!!” In this piece, the author explains how he got a mastectomy, the troubles he had getting a legal name change, his experience with a hysterectomy and hormones, and his near-death experience in the hospital, where he was poorly treated and subjected to an unsuccessful bottom surgery. The author distinguishes between himself and lesbians as follows: “A lesbian is a woman who is pleased to be female and whose love object is female. A Transsexual loves females but feels trapped in the female body of her own.” The author clearly expected to find a sympathetic and interested audience in this magazine, and the magazine devotes considerable space to his story.

Subsequently, we find an essay by trans* activist Virginia Prince, who had been working with Harry Benjamin, the pioneering sexologist, for fifteen years. She reported that while Benjamin had begun his practice with fifty-four patients a few years before, he now had a thousand patients. Both Prince and Benjamin discuss funding sex reassignment surgeries through Medicaid, and Benjamin cautions against irreversible changes and stresses that “no man is 100% man and no woman is 100% woman.” A final article in this issue of *Echo of Sappho* is written by a female-to-male transsexual about to go through sex reassignment surgery.

Rather than presenting a uniform position of feminist transphobia, the articles remind us that transsexuality was debated, scrutinized, discussed, and accepted and rejected by different feminists at different times. And while white academic feminist discourse by Raymond, Jeffreys, and others seemed committed to combating transsexuals and keeping them out of “women’s spaces,” many other venues—for *Echo of Sappho* was hardly alone—treated trans* people as a permanent presence within women’s communities.

New discussions under the heading of “transfeminism” have begun to remedy some of these disconnects between feminists and trans* activists. In *Whipping Girl* (2007), for example, Julia Serano reminds us that any new take on feminism must be capacious enough to include, recognize, and celebrate the femininities of women who were not born female. Not only that, but the often precarious femininity of trans* women should be seen as the centerpiece of new feminisms and not as a negation of feminist politics. Serano writes, “Until feminists work to empower femininity and pry it away from the insipid, inferior meanings that plague it—weakness, helplessness, fragility, passivity, frivolity, and artificiality—those meanings will continue to haunt every person who is female and/or feminine.” Recognizing that femininity is co-constructed and co-inhabited across bodies that are male *and* female, trans* *and* cis, Serano calls not just for an inclusive trans* feminism but one that actively embraces femininity rather than leaving the concept stranded as a synonym for weakness, dependence, and fear.

Serano’s work is important because it recognizes how feminism has managed to be *about* women and has worked hard to expose gender hierarchies, but has done so without reinvesting in femininity in the process. Indeed, many versions of feminisms have viewed femininity with suspicion, characterizing it as pure artifice, as theater, and, in the work of

Judith Butler, as performance. Serano, however, like many trans* theorists, resists the notion that femininity, and gender in general, is a performance (“If one more person tells me that ‘all gender is performance,’ I think I am going to strangle them”). Although she recognizes that trans*women co-create femininities with cisgender women, Serano and others worry that adopting a theory of performativity implies, in a transphobic way, that transgender is not real, material, authentic. Yet this resistance to the notion of gender performance has set up another site of antagonism that operates alongside the radical versus trans* feminism divide—namely, queer theory versus trans* theory.

Within trans* theory, Butler’s most influential idea is that all bodies must submit to gender norms but that some bodies can repeat those norms to the point of absurdity, shaking loose from some of the confinement that those norms enact. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler rewrote liberal feminism and even parts of Western philosophy by making the gender-variant woman the subject of each. While the masculine woman, Butler claimed, was unthinkable within French feminism because of its commitment to a gender-stable and unified conception of womanhood, she was similarly unthinkable for continental philosophy and psychoanalysis. *Gender Trouble* offered gender as a site of constraint, not flexibility. In the book that followed in 1993, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler responded to various misreadings of her earlier work, precisely around the topic of flexibility, and attempted again to emphasize the inflexibility of the gendered condition, its resistance to voluntary action, and its availability for only discrete re-significations.

While in *Gender Trouble* the butch body made mischievous trouble for all stable understandings of the category “woman,” *Bodies That Matter* deployed that body to make trouble for understandings of masculine power that could not conceive of masculinity without men. In neither book, however, was gender flexible; rather, it was the inflexibility of a female commitment to masculinity that signified the thorn in the side of feminist and psychoanalytic conceptions of the phallus. Finally, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler returned to the entwined interests of transgenderism, intersexuality, and transsexuality to argue that gender stability plays a crucial role in the production of the category of the “human.” Indeed, many of our understandings of the human proceed from and presume gender normativity as a foundation for other modes of being. In this book she calls for “recognition” for trans* modes of being.

Despite her rigorous critique of foundationalist notions of the gendered body, Butler has sometimes been seen as having questionable views on trans* politics. In particular, Butler’s idea that gender is performative has been rejected by a number of trans* theorists as being a denial that some trans* people need to undergo sex reassignment surgeries. The most complex articulation of transsexual suspicion of Butler occurred in Jay Prosser’s 1998 book *Second Skins: Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Prosser asked what effect a theory of gender performativity had had on emergent understandings of transsexuality. He also argued that, for all our talk about “materiality” and “embodiment,” it is precisely the body that vanishes within ever-more abstract theories of gender, sexuality, and desire. Prosser also took issue with the way the trans* body came to stand in for bodily plasticity in many poststructuralist discussions of gender. He wrote:

Queer's alignment of itself with transgender performativity represents queer's sense of its own 'higher purpose,' in fact there are transgendered trajectories, in particular transsexual trajectories, that aspire to that which this scheme devalues. Namely, there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to be.

Prosser's work was enormously influential, for it articulated many of the misgivings that trans* theorists felt about queer conjurings of gender flexibility, gender plasticity, and gender performance. This emphasis on the real for trans* people was a valuable intervention in the late 1990s, coming at a time when they were often viewed within medicine and psychology as delusional and pathological. And Prosser was not alone in his critique of gender performativity. While his critique of Butler was theoretically dense, a version of it could be found in all kinds of trans* work and activism, by people such as Stephen Whittle, James Cromwell, and Viviane K. Namaste. The thrust of these rejections of poststructuralism concerned a misreading of "performativity" as "theatricality." This notion of a theatrical performance of self, some trans* activists felt, clashed with the sense of "realness" that they struggled to achieve. Misreading Butler in this way allowed for a trans* backlash against both radical feminism and poststructuralist feminism and the field quickly became polarized.

More recently, however, trans* theory has swung back around and, in the work of J. R. Latham and Micha Cárdenas, new understandings of "transrealities" have emerged alongside deep engagement with notions of performance and performativity. The tension that seemed to animate Prosser's early critiques of Butler have now been dispelled within the discourses of trans* feminism, which borrow from early trans* narratives and Butlerian gender theory alike. Joe Latham's work, for example, argues not simply that trans* people are "real," but that the concept of reality itself requires an update thanks to the expanded gender norms that have resulted from a newly visible trans* community. Latham's work is nuanced, drawing from extensive ethnographic research on trans* experiences with surgery, psychiatric treatment, sex, and family. Cardenas also focuses upon an amplified understanding of "realness" and she has written texts on what she calls "The Transreal."

Butler's concept of "gender performativity," despite becoming the target of so many trans* critiques, actually furnished trans* theorists with the theoretical framings necessary to push back on essentialist accounts of normative identities and the fetishizing gaze so often directed at trans* bodies. In her first two books, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Butler performed the philosophical heavy lifting that allowed us to rethink bodily ontologies separate from the concept of a stable and foundational gender. Arguing that sex, the material of the body, is gender all along, she proposed that bodies are produced by discourse rather than being the sources of discourse. Once our understanding of the relationship between reality, materiality, and ideology has been remapped according to these inversions, it becomes possible to think about gender transitions in a way that doesn't depend on a linear model of transformation, in which a female body becomes male or a male body becomes female. Butler's work enabled eccentric narratives about being and becoming and nudged male masculinity out of the heart of our

philosophical inquires. We all stand in the space she created.

As we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century, the standoff between radical feminism and trans* feminism continues to represent a live and urgent issue. In May 2016 the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, in an issue dedicated to “Trans/Feminisms,” featured an introductory essay by managing editor Susan Stryker and longtime trans* scholar and activist Talia M. Bettcher. In this piece, Stryker and Bettcher express dismay about new forms of “anti-transgender backlash” in feminist circles, citing a book by Jeffreys and a few articles about Caitlin Jenner in support of their claim that we are witnessing “an escalating struggle over public speech.” Ultimately, however, and to their credit, Stryker and Bettcher are more interested in outlining a trans* feminism that has emerged from within trans* movements themselves than in continuing to invest in a potentially counterproductive argument with feminists such as Jeffreys, who prove to be unrepresentative of new generations of feminist thought and activism.

Stryker and Bettcher note, for example, the importance of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality to an emergent trans* feminist position, and they mention the biographies of several trans* men and trans* women of color who represent very different trajectories of gender nonconformity than the standoff between white trans* women and white feminists might imply. Intersectionality remains a very important tool within any attempt to understand the historical arc of relations between trans* people and feminist and queer communities precisely because, while white women were often exclusively focused on issues of womanhood, people of color could not afford a singular focus. The Combahee River Collective is exemplary in this respect, and many scholars have recently turned back to their manifesto for the model it provides of intersectional and politically labile organizing. Stryker and Bettcher turn also to the life of trans* woman and Stonewall Riots leader Sylvia Rivera as evidence of an articulation of feminist principles from within a burgeoning trans* liberation movement.

In 1973, when Sylvia Rivera—Stonewall veteran and cofounder of the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR)—fought her way onto the stage of the Christopher Street Liberation Day rally in New York, after having first been blocked by antitrans lesbian feminists and their gay male supporters, she spoke defiantly of her own experiences of being raped and beaten by predatory heterosexual men she had been incarcerated with, and of the work that she and others in STAR were doing to support other incarcerated trans women. She chastised the crowd for not being more supportive of trans people who experienced exactly the sort of gendered violence that feminists typically decried and asserted, with her own characteristic brio, that “the women who have tried to fight for their sex changes, or to become women, are the women’s liberation.”

As Stryker and Bettcher astutely note, Rivera articulates a truly liberatory vision of womanhood, one around which, moreover, multiple feminist agendas could coalesce

absent the seemingly inevitable standoff between lesbian feminists and those could-be and would-be trans* allies.

Notably, trans* feminisms in other parts of the world, such as Latin America, are less likely to arrive at such an impasse. Claudia Sofía Garriga-López, for example, has written at length about trans* feminism in Ecuador, which she describes as “a grassroots political project rooted in material politics” that understands trans* liberation as central to the fight against patriarchal systems. This particular version of feminism, Garriga-López shows, recognizes sites of shared struggle between trans* sex workers, homemakers, gang members, punk rockers, and others who share what she calls “subjacent symmetries.”

In an article titled “Transfeminist Crossroads,” Garriga-López tells the story of the compromises and conflicts, the shared visions and divided loyalties, that beset a trans* feminist activist group in Ecuador that tried to get a bill passed allowing people to list their gender instead of their birth sex on their identification papers. This struggle did not conclude with the desired outcome: although trans* people won the right to change their sex and get a special “alternative ID,” the group did not manage to persuade the legislature that the shift from listing one’s sex on government IDs to listing gender should be universal, applicable to all people. The goal here was to protect trans* people from the inevitable exposure they faced as they tried to change their sex on the ID, versus having the opportunity, along with everyone else, to list their gender according to their own dispositions. This right would have been truly transformational and represents a broad goal of trans* feminism.

Nonetheless, Garriga-López draws hope from the grassroots movement and uses it to show that “transfeminism is not a one-way flow of solidarity from nontrans feminists toward trans people” but instead that “trans activists have been at the forefront of feminist and LGBT struggles for many decades, and the category of ‘transfeminism’ signals the articulation of these practices into a cohesive political standpoint.” This point is crucial in any quest to move forward toward multiple visions of trans* futurity and away from the traps of internecine conflict. In other words, feminism has always been articulated by trans* activists and trans* activism has always been feminist. Garriga-López’s research broadens the scope of the conversation and reminds us of how narrow the landscapes of the United States and Europe are relative to more global understandings of the politics of trans*. While activists in the United States, the UK, and Europe have generally been content to call for “gender recognition,” keeping themselves narrowly within the politics of recognition that has fueled neoliberalism, as we see in the case of Ecuador, trans* feminism elsewhere articulates much more extensive goals that do not single out trans* people but rather extend from the experience of trans* people to everyone else. Here we can glimpse a trans* feminism that joins the experience of contrary gendering to other bodily forms that have been subject to discrimination.

In the new landscapes of power and domination that emerge at the beginning of a potentially disastrous shift from neoliberal mechanics of inclusion to the post-democratic policies of violent exclusion and the enforcement of homogeneity, we need to situate

sexual and gender minorities carefully rather than claiming any predetermined status of precarity or power. The goal of a global trans* feminism, after all, will not be simply the enhancement of opportunities for trans* women but the creation of a trans* feminism that works for all women. Accordingly, as trans* activists try to expand categories of embodiment beyond the binary, we should be reaching not for better and more accurate descriptions of who we are, but better and more diverse approaches to thinking about gender and poverty, gender and child-rearing, gender and labor, gender and pleasure, gender and punishment. Various models of feminism in the past have stopped well short of global solidarity and have tended to focus upon the most favorable reforms for white women and middle-class women. This is partly because of the myopia of liberal feminism and corporate feminism (*lean in*, for example) and partly because “women” make up such a huge category that finding common ground is nigh on impossible. Trans* feminism cannot necessarily overcome these obstacles either, but it can exert sufficient pressure on the category of “woman” to challenge and refuse its universalist tendencies. As we enter a new era of untrammelled patriarchy and racism embodied by the U.S. president, trans* feminism has a lot of work to do. It is not my intent to offer here (or anywhere) a clear program for a trans* feminist world, but I do believe that, like the feminists in Ecuador, we should operate on the assumption that the changes that would be good for trans* women will ultimately be beneficial for all of us.