

Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism

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A note on gender

This essay deals with the discursive and material histories of people I refer to as “trans women,” which I broadly define as anyone not assigned-female at birth who experiences their bodies as female, lives their gender in a way that could be taken as female, and/or identifies as woman/trans-female-spectrum/transfeminism. I rather begrudgingly use this term with a degree of hesitance as it certainly erases the complexities of my gender experience, but I aim to broadly relate to those who have been coercively assigned a gender category other than Woman but who still inherit much of the legacy of such a category.

Towards an Insurrectionary Transfeminism

Trans people remain strangers and outcasts within much of the contemporary discourses of insurrectionary feminism. Essays about “male-bodied” perpetrators of sexual assault and “socialized men and women” seem to leave much to be analyzed about the ways in which trans people have historically related the functioning of gender systems and the development of capitalism as a system. It is in this context that we discursively intervene with that which we might term insurrectionary trans-feminism, an analysis which distinctively analyzes the ways in which trans bodies relate to the legacy of capitalism and the possibilities of living communism and spreading anarchy. This is distinctly **not** a plea for inclusion, nor is it an articulation of identity politics, but rather an articulation of why we might be invested in insurrection and communization with those who share our desires and perhaps a preliminary set of ideas on how our positionalities might be used in such processes. In order to imagine the possibilities of subversion, however, we must first recognize the historical relations of capitalism to the formulation of the trans subject.

The relation between capitalism and the trans subject is a contentious one. While many theorists such as Leslie Feinberg have sought to piece together a universal, ahistorical narrative of trans people throughout history across the world, we see such a task as ultimately failing to take into account the precise economic and social conditions which gave rise to each specific instance of gender variance. Gender nonconformity is not a stable or coherent phenomenon which appears in history due to the same conditions, rather it contextually can have a multiplicity of meanings. While it could certainly be useful to analyze the ways in which capitalism has instituted binary-based gender systems as a means to organize reproductive labor in colonial contexts with different gender systems, for the purposes of this essay we will begin with the notion of the transsexual in context of the early 20th century United States, where the first narratives of transsexuality began to appear. These narratives are intimately tied to the rise of capitalist ventures in experimental medical procedures which gave rise to the the first forms of gender reassignment surgery. By the 1950s, transsexuality had gained public attention in the United States with gender reassignment surgery of Christine Jorgensen. Jorgensen’s narrative, as some narratives just twenty years before her, became a model for the transsexual identity narrative, in which the subject feels that she is in the “wrong body” and that surgery has made her feel whole and relieved the immense feeling of body dysphoria now that she is a real woman. It is in this narrative that we find the experiences of gender dysphoria taking shape to define a concrete subject position of “trans.”

At the same time, as capital has created the ability for trans individuals to modify their bodies in the ways that they see fit, it has also, with biomedical and psychological apparatuses, proliferated the means by which to discipline the trans body. Two of the most notable apparatuses to this effect are the Standards of Care, which enforced rigorous standards of femininity and passibility as a necessary first step towards access to medical technologies of transition, as well as the “charm schools” which accompanied many GID clinics which sought to properly resocialize trans women as “proper ladies” with manners, grace, and all of the feminine wiles of “natural women.” The trans subject’s desires are easily molded into that which can be profitable to capitalism, whether it is countless sessions of laser hair removal sessions, gender reassignment surgeries, or hormone therapy. That is, trans subjectivity is bound to the conditions of capitalism and disciplinary techniques which have given rise to it. We deploy these words carefully, however, as we also recognize the ways in which “radicals” and “feminists” have deployed the very same as a means of constructing trans women as capitalist-created penetrators of vanity and artificial artifacts of femininity. Yet the constructedness of the trans subject and the trans body is no more tied to the history of capitalism and domination than the constructedness of woman as an identity and a body, or the constructedness of racialized identities and bodies.

We do not mean to imply that trans identity is based upon a particular form of body modification or access to medical technology, but rather that these early narratives of trans experience and the disciplinary techniques shaping such identities are foundational in the ways in which trans identity has grown, whether in the broadening terms of constituting a political “trans community” on the basis of sharing a feeling of dysphoria or the emergence of genderqueer as a politicized subjectivity which has become delight of postmodernism. Transfeminism, then, has emerged as theory dedicated to an articulation of the trans speaking subject. Yet capitalism has an ever expanding amount of room to incorporate an infinite amount of gendered subjectivities which can be rendered value-creating to capital. In this way, trans theory faces limits similar to feminist theory, which has produced a feminized form of capital which is no less brutal in its form. The task, then, is to create an insurrectionary theory which is based on rendering trans bodies without function in the process of value creation, which necessitates their very identity as trans, as woman, as human. As trans people, we feel corporeality forcibly pushed onto us in an attempt to render us intelligible, to use the state of our bodies to comprehend our gender and sell us “more natural-looking” bodies. We feel our bodies outweigh our chosen identities when we interact with others and do not pass. As trans women, as we experience the legacy of trans subjectivity within capitalism, we also feel the weight of the corporeality of women in capitalism crush our existences. We experience the implicit violence in gendered division of labor every time we are raped and beaten and condescended to and treated as a hot she-male sex toy. Yet it is in this experience that we might see the possibilities of human strike for the trans woman.

Trans women experience corporeality in a unique way. While capital hopes to continue to use the female body as proletarian machine to reproduce labor-power, trans women’s bodies cannot produce more workers and is constantly already viewed as denaturalized. Perhaps in valorizing this inoperability in reproduction, and willfully extending it to all forms of reproductive labor, we see the potentiality of human strike. Ways of extending this remain to be seen, but in this affront to capitalist-produced nature and matrices of heteronormativity which are crucial to the functioning of capitalism, we see the kinship between the human strike of trans women and the materialization of a non-reproductive, purely negative queer force. It seems that the trans woman too has no future, and thus through the building of this negative force might have a

stake in wrecking everything and abolishing herself in the process. In any case, we do not have the answers that will render society inoperable, that will end the social reproduction of this world. Yet as trans women, we know that every strike against capital is a strike against the mechanisms of gender oppression, and that every strike against the gendered violence in our lives is a strike against the machinations of capital.

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