

# **Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politics**

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The condition of trans women in society is entirely contradictory, yet in existing Marxist gender theory we are largely absent.

At present, trans women live against much of the weight placed by society. Trans women still serve as a punchline by our very mention in popular culture. Yet “Trans women are women” is no longer a mere slogan, but a lived truth: acceptance has been found by trans women as friends, comrades, colleagues, lovers.

This process has been unsteady. In many cases, trans women are obliged to live a life with varying terms of address and choice of attire and persona from circle to circle. One woman might live out her chosen gender around friends but not their family, or be fully “out” to both friends and family but remain (to best appearances) a man at her workplace. Some women are known to be a transgender by almost no one around them, including close friends and all work colleagues; with the relative degree of safety this affords contingent on continual secrecy, and tacit omission. Others describe themselves as something other than women to confidants, but simplify meticulously when in public (any deviation from a tidy dyad being widely seen as inscrutable, delegitimizing). Inevitably, even the tidiest of adult transitions require a split between an identification in active use, and one only remembered. Overt transition can follow months or years of one’s intimate friends knowing better than one’s workplace, and family.

While equivalent to the “closet” as previously well-covered in writings around gay culture (a state which can be lived in, stiflingly, or exited dramatically), this shifting of identification can cause even more dissonance. Once the question of legal identity is introduced things get yet more complicated: conflicting bureaucratic standards across the British state mean that a trans woman with a “female” marked passport and bank account might be imprisoned in a male jail for lacking a “gender recognition certificate” (a process requiring hiring a lawyer to make the case for one’s authentic womanhood in front of a committee, among other expenses and degradations).

This conflicted state can not be meaningfully denied, and serves as an ambiguous sociality which trans women are obliged to negotiate daily. Efforts to fabricate a new activist “common sense” will always reach their limits in the face of widespread denial of trans women’s claims to womanhood. Neither a legalistic nor reform minded approach can achieve full trans emancipation. The intense suffering faced by trans women does not find its origins in civic disempowerment or social “illegibility” alone, but also their very existence in the face of powerful conventional understandings of sexed bodies. From the crudest playground taunts to the most convoluted breakthroughs in Evolutionary Psychology, a firm foundation of ideological rejection stands between trans women and mundane acceptance of us as women. Our existence alone is unsettling for many, and this is a fact to be grasped, and worked with. It leaves us on the outside.

Systemic exclusion from housing and work, the threat of sexual violence, and physical aggression in household and on the street, will all continue to confine and cut short the lives of trans women. These conditions demand a concerted political response from communists.

Marxism’s unique potential for appreciating, and improving, the place of trans women’s position in society is its readiness to analyze contradictions. Trans women have often not been included in Marxist gender theorization and feminist materialism. But the mutual benefit seems clear: without understanding our particular plight, only a blunted and partial view of gender is possible. And without a systemic view of gender, political solutions to that plight will be equally limited.

Only through Marxism, and communist politics, can our current conditions be not only lamented, or “critiqued,” but abolished. This essay will examine why the so-called “Transgender

Moment” occurred at all, critically consider the developments in consciousness, and gesture towards what communist theory – and only communist theory – can offer those committed to revolutionary gender politics.

## I. The “Moment,” and its Limits

This decade has already seen a dizzying series of shifts for trans women, with a striking increase of both widespread acceptance, and murderous backlash.

The much-vaunted “transgender moment” is a significant cultural breakthrough, by any measure. Trans women are enjoying a newfound popularity, able to speak in our own voice like never before. Two of the highest profile trans people in the United States – Laverne Cox and Janet Mock – are black women who have spoken and written cogently about their experiences transitioning and politics of solidarity. Each are in high demand for talk shows, think piece quotes, panel discussions with popular thinkers, official openings, and the rest. Yet an onward march of trans acceptance can not be assumed safely: black and trans women of color in the US are being murdered in increasing numbers.

Violence of this kind happens across the US, and is mostly *ad hoc*: often targeting street workers, or taking place within interpersonal relationships. Evidence from countries where transition has become more popularly known is not encouraging. Each year the names read out at international “Trans Day of Remembrance” events are dominated by Brazilian women, with 144 killed throughout 2016. (As with cisgendered women, sex workers are especially at risk.) This March, especially shocking footage of a 42 year old trans woman’s torture and murder was uploaded and widely viewed on social media.<sup>1</sup> Much the same holds true outside the Americas. As trans politics has flourished around the world, violent reprisals have often been followed. Less than a year after Austrian genderqueer performer Conchita Wurst’s Eurovision victory, a transgender refugee was found murdered in Vienna. (I moved to the city a few months later).<sup>2</sup> Last August, a Turkish trans woman who had famously been involved resisting the police efforts to disrupt Istanbul Pride, Hande Kader, was found dead and burnt in a forest.

Raewyn Connell, one of the first trans women to enjoy a successful career in academia, has referred to a society as historically establishing a “gender order.” Increasing trans consciousness has already thoroughly unsettled this order, with often murderous responses from those invested in it.

While those already facing down poverty, racism, and disabilities are at greatest risk from these gender reprisals, all trans women live endangered lives, and have a shared condition of oppression. None of us have lived lives free from fear of immediate harm from the men they encounter, not to mention deprivation and incomprehension from society as a whole. Transitions anywhere in the world accompanied with high rates of severe mental health issues, co-morbid with risking rejection by family and peers, loss of work, and isolation. Suicide is a commonplace for trans women throughout the world. Trans women are 49 times more likely to contract HIV

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<sup>1</sup> Dom Phillips, “Torture and Killing of Transgender Woman Stun Brazil,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Hande Öncü, “Turkish transgender asylum seeker living in Vienna murdered,” *Transgender Europe*, January 30, 2015.

than the US general population, while specific support or prevention for trans women remains rare.<sup>3</sup> In short, trans women worldwide faced a shared stigma which we do not always survive.

While perhaps shocking in some lights, these grim developments have been recited many times over for those familiar with the political tendency known as “trans activism.” Repetition of these dire conditions is rarely accompanied by any proposed solution. As such, both our prospects for emancipation, and the means such a movement would require, remain quite unclear.

The right, by contrast, have a clear view and strategy of how to keep hatred of trans women at its current intensity. In recent years, to these on-going acts of disciplinary violence, and steady grind of “structural” negation and psychological devastation (which normally plays out privately), right-wing political organization against the emancipation of trans women has become an earnest focus.

In the United States, the right wing of capital, represented by the Republican Party, and a range of “pro-family” NGOs, have turned their focus towards trans women, now that their prior hopes of outlawing gay marriage state by state were voided by the Supreme Court’s 2015 decision constitutionally protecting it. In the process of the criminalization itself, media campaigns cast trans women as sexual predators, drawing on a wealth of related cultural tropes. In the United States, “Bathroom Bills” outlawing transgender individuals using public toilets of the appropriate gender are spreading state-by-state, so far enacted in North Carolina. (The offending bill, HBII, also restricted municipalities from introducing regulations such as minimum wages or child labor restrictions, making it something of a reactionaries’ bonanza.) Last year, a proposed measure in Tennessee was defeated after a letter from executives was sent to legislators warning the measure would be “bad for our employees and bad for business.”<sup>4</sup> Tellingly, Vice President Mike Pence tacitly framed the “bathroom bills” as a matter of states rights. Meanwhile, across Europe, traditionalist groups are organizing varied efforts under the pretext of opposition to “gender ideology.”<sup>5</sup> Opposition to “gender ideology” includes efforts to keep gay marriage outlawed (as in the failed Slovakian 2015 constitutional referendum, or the large protests organized by French neo-fascist group Génération Identitaire), while also pursuing the delegitimization of trans people.

## II. Trans Women’s Communities & Social Reproduction

And yet, despite the violence, more and more trans women are finding acceptance and recognition by those around them. How has this happened, in the face of widespread disparagement and oppression? While apparently spontaneous to those outside trans communities, a proliferation of dedicated organization and labor has gone into trans women’s sporadic success in living and surviving openly.

Beneath the “moment” there is a churn of activity, largely invisible to those it not does serve, but actively contributing to and progressively nurturing trans consciousness.

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<sup>3</sup> “Other Balms, Other Gileads,” by the late Bryn Kelly, published in the radical AIDS journal *We Who Feel Differently* in 2014, relates her life as an HIV trans woman. For the on-going uncertainty around trans women’s use of PrEP see Raquel Willis, “Why Aren’t More Trans Women on PrEP?” *Rewire*, July 14, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Trudy Ring, “Tennessee Flushes ‘Bathroom Bill’ Away Again,” *The Advocate*, April 18, 2016. The bill was finally defeated this year.

<sup>5</sup> This term was originally used by Polish Catholic bishops in a 2014 Pastoral letter, but is now widespread among reactionary activist organizations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Trans women have been encouraged to live their womanhood openly through networks of mutual support and solidarity, which have expanded and strengthened significantly in recent years. Such networks have been constituted both online and IRL. These developments form the basis for the current surge of “visibility,” but reach their limit in that they serve only to supplant the work usually done by the heterosexual family, and not to replace it. The successful operation of these largely unacknowledged networks is the basis for an untold number of trans women reaching the necessary state of education, confidence and consciousness to live openly. This increasingly commonplace development (a trajectory of confusion leading through to clarity, and then action) has as its secondary consequence the startling levels of violence in backlash against it.

Technological developments have contributed to these shifts as well. Much of the hormonal treatments now available to trans women, have been used by cis women for decades as fertility control. Artificial estrogen is used in both artificial birth control, and so-called “Male to Female” (MtF) transition. Progesterone, used in contraceptives for its mimicking of the pregnant state, is also used by trans women for its desirable impact on fat distribution, preventing hair loss, and skin softness. Of course, the relationship of biological research to emancipatory goals is never automatic. Scientific developments alone will not produce a political breakthrough. While some movement towards trans emancipation is clearly underway, it is on the basis of active efforts by trans women to subjectively advantage themselves via objective breakthroughs, from endocrine theory to the internet.

It’s not without a tinge of irony that the same natural scientific foundation widely attributed to defining Second Wave Feminism should be understood as one of the underlying foundations for contemporary trans feminism (although, of course, many individual trans women may not have access to hormone treatment, or opt against it for whatever reason). Most opponents of women using birth control are equally hostile to trans women treating themselves with estrogen (or, indeed, existing at all). The discovery of the endocrine system (and practices following from it) implicitly threatened the naturalization of sex, in a way which reactionaries see as demanding a political response: containment or reversal.

Recent developments in the prospects and “visibility” of trans women have occurred through work circulating and developing the existing resources and knowledge concerning the transgender condition. These were built up across decades through arrangements ranging from LGBT social centers to the ball scene’s Houses, networks of trans sex workers (both manifold informal groupings and political organizations such as New York City’s Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), youth groups, support groups, and the “queen hotels” of Tenderloin, San Francisco.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, organization of various kinds has been required for mutual support and protection by trans people intent on survival. This activity formed the basis of several generations of trans people (once more likely to call themselves transvestites or drag queens, now increasingly although not exclusively trans women), who have now become the cultural focus of the so-called “transgender moment”.

Just as the work of these earlier groups is necessary for understanding the context around historic events like the anti-police Compton Cafeteria Riot of 1966 and Stonewall Riot of 1969, the

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<sup>6</sup> On the Compton’s Cafeteria Riots and their context of early activism in the Tenderloin, see Neal Broverman, “We Can Still Hear the ‘Screaming Queens’ of the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot,” *The Advocate*, August 8, 2016; Nicole Pasulka, “Ladies In The Streets: Before Stonewall, Transgender Uprising Changed Lives,” *NPR Code Switch*, May 5, 2015; and Susan Stryker, “Transgender Liberation: The Compton’s Cafeteria Riot of 1966.”

seemingly spontaneous resurgence of trans politics in the 2010s follows from the ceaseless social reproductive work trans women have committed to establishing their own new gender order. Trans women, like drag queens and transvestites before them, have not come from nowhere. Indeed, an enormous amount of labor is required to bring each of us into being, and to keep us alive. Appreciating this on-going work is vital for both understanding the source of the current historic shifts underway, and grasping their potential. Trans social reproduction is not revolutionary in itself, but it ensures there are those alive who owe this to networks of solidarity and support, rather than the conventional gender order. It is for this reason that trans women have always, and will continue to, play such a prominent role in the leadership of LGBT struggles. Whatever the limits implicit in the politics of survival, survival itself is a predicate of revolutionary action.

Mass access to internet communication has rapidly advanced the prospects for trans women, ending a prior isolation which had denied many access to the information and communities they needed to safely transition. These autonomous groupings of trans people have developed rapidly in recent years, developing a considerable body of in-jokes.

This is just one expression of the increasingly articulated scene of trans cultural production, where research, fiction, and games have been added to autobiography as fully elaborated mediums for cultural expression and mutual development on the part of trans women. Take for instance Cristin Williams' revisionist account of the women's movement for the TransAdvocate (emphasising the role trans women played throughout "Second Wave" feminism), or Morgan M. Page's "One From the Vaults" podcast, which explores the historical evidence of North American (and New Zealand) trans lives across the 20th century. Autonomous left media with a queer focus such as Novara Media has offered theory platforms to many trans women. The NYC Trans Oral History Project currently run by trans activist Michelle O'Brien seeks to retrieve and present the history of that storied city.

In fiction writing, this DIY ethos has flourished particularly in the face of a perceived continued failure for even better known trans-themed media (*Transparent*, *The Danish Girl*, *I'm Caitlyn*, et al) to provide much of interest or relevance to trans women. Literature written by and for trans women is becoming a thriving field, and seems likely to continue. Topside Press, a small publishing house oriented towards publishing transgender writers of all identifications, held its first Trans Women Writing Workshop last year. Crowdfunding websites are allowing time-intensive video production such as the Gender Analysis series to be produced without institutional support. YouTube stars such as Kat Blaque share both practical advice and developed political perspectives to subscribers (and an untold number of lesser known vloggers share transition progress reports). Cultural expression and collective memory through history seem likely to continue this rapid expansion in the coming period.

Previously, a "boy" or a "man" experiencing unaccountable impulses towards femininity might have had to travel to another city, or at least muster the courage to attend her first likely club night or support group session, to be told explicitly: "You are not alone." No longer.

#### *The City, Trans Health, and Other Research Projects*

Trans women often need support effecting departure from regions where widespread hostility towards transition is prevalent, and "offline" communities remain weak. The emancipation of trans women seems focused around a handful of metropolitan areas, with little hope of any more generalized emancipation imagined. This divide between the provinces and metropole does not allow for any straightforward politics of flight, however: isolation and insecurity around employment and housing is a commonplace even for many trans women living in the largest cities of the

world. Imprisonment in male prisons and police violence are a risk for trans women wherever we live.<sup>7</sup>

Healthcare is a field of especially great importance, here. Whereas widespread ignorance and differing arbitrary standards within the medical industry leave doctors holding varying positions from place to place, online access is now available to a wide range of experiences, and the latest research. Online communities enable everything from referrals for reliable professionals, to advice concerning options for hormonal treatments and precise bureaucratic navigations. While of course still primarily accessed through the medical profession, increasingly hormones are both obtained and researched outside of its limits, by trans women ourselves. Mental health is an especially fraught concern for trans women, who have been forced to navigate suspicion and often outright hostility and mistreatment from both psychiatric and psychological establishments. This has proven to be work that no one else (including NGOs and the “caring” face of the state) could be consistently relied upon to do. Supporting other trans women psychologically is a commonplace for active members of trans communities, from establishing support networks for newcomers to foreign cities, to emergency suicide watches arranged *ad hoc* between friends.

Much as a substantial body of research on HIV during the early years of the AIDS crisis was performed by activists involved in ACT-UP and the Treatment Action Group, trans women have often been forced to devise their own practical knowledge on the scientific and social issues affecting them directly.<sup>8</sup> Extensive repositories collecting relevant information from hormone research papers, to advice on breaking news to partners and family, to facial surgery introductions, are freely available online. Such tutorials have been in use since at least the 19th century, but today have proliferated in a newly accessible form.

As the material communities supporting trans people continue to strengthen, more and more trans women will be able to assert themselves openly as women. These networks resemble those supporting women seeking abortions in Ireland and other countries which outlaw the procedure: both information and resources are shared to those often in need of covert support.

The development underlying the cultural shift towards “trans acceptability” will proceed largely unnoticed, despite increasingly taking place on publicly or semi-publicly accessible internet sites. A failure to understand these organizations will lead to a one-sided perspective on historical development around gender issues (which observes reaction without appreciation for the progress inspiring it).

This almost entirely unpaid enterprise, the everyday/life-saving social work which occupies countless trans communities, will support the realization of trans womanhood over the coming generations. In fact this activity seems sure to involve increasing numbers. Distribution of information and support of this kind could be seen as a political enterprise (the “politics of survival” commonly referred to by contemporary feminist activists), but perhaps is better seen as an *ersatz* source of social reproduction. In many cases, unable to realize themselves as women through their families and conventional peer groups, trans women have adopted other means

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<sup>7</sup> To provide three recent examples: “Trans Woman Eyrycka King Attacked & Denied Medical Treatment in New York Prison” (New York City); “Transgender woman ‘raped 2,000 times’ in all-male prison” (Brisbane); “Trans woman receives police payout after being forced to strip naked and sprayed with mace” (Somerset, UK).

<sup>8</sup> Much of this work is done orally or through IMs, although the autonomous production of extended documents is also common. There are innumerable examples possible to cite here, so I will simply include the most recent of these texts I’ve encountered, available here. Another widely distributed example, produced at the Church Street Community Centre, can be found here.



to teach themselves everything from necessary medical information to gendered cultural affects such as cosmetics, expected mannerisms, intonation, idiolect, and so on.

Together, this collectively accumulated body of knowledge can save lives, or make them feel worth living for the first time. The success trans women are increasingly enjoying is based on a bedrock of solidarity and support which few not in need of it would ever realize, but which works tirelessly (if imperfectly) to keep those existing against the grain of prevailing culture alive, and if possible thriving.

However, this social reproduction of trans women cannot always co-exist comfortably alongside the more conventional variety offered by the family. Rejection by the families of trans women has been reported from all class positions, levels of education, and religious affiliations. The increasing number of informed and emboldened women will, accordingly, produce more rejection from transphobic families and peer groups. In many cases, fundraiser cash provided focuses on escaping violent relatives. Many are faced with a choice between their “chosen family” of other trans women and queers, and their conventional one. There is no indication that this will cease across time by mere ambient “progress” alone, or that developments will prove in any way linear, as recent rearguard political efforts by state governments demonstrate. Moral appeals towards parents to fulfill their culturally mandated obligations properly or for employers to discriminate less against employees or potential hires will only ever achieve change by increments within the existing system of lopsided power and economic exploitation.

In this way, a “positive” solution to the damage continually inflicted on trans people attempting to realize their lives as befits their gender cannot exist alone. Support for those suffering under their existing conditions must include the undoing of gender as a coercive distribution of violence. Trans women in particular raise the necessity of this political strategy to the fore, as we live through our genders as a more overtly contradictory state than most would ever care to.

### III. Trans Origins, Serano, and Trans Psychologism

A precondition to formulating a strategy appropriate for trans liberation in our era will be a sober assessment of the current course of trans politics. This ground clearing work can help us grasp the impasses that run throughout contemporary trans feminist theory, and demonstrate the potential for a Marxist resolution.

While trans activism has proven politically diverse, and found representation in a range of differing left tendencies, one thinker in particular appears to have significantly shaped its language and contours among transgender activists. Julia Serano’s thought rarely receives attention outside of activist circles, and remains largely unheard within Marxist theorization. Yet Serano’s influence on contemporary gender activism, and especially that relating to trans women, should not be underestimated.<sup>9</sup> Trained as a biologist, Serano belongs to neither academia nor the established left. But this has not inhibited her success as a thinker, or activist.

*Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Feminism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, published in 2007, intended to account for both the greater intensity of prejudice against trans women, and the failure of communities set up for gender deviants to accommodate them. Towards this end, Serano devised the term “transmisogyny” to identify a form of transphobia spe-

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<sup>9</sup> See: Meredith Talusan, “The Lasting Transgender Legacy of Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl*,” *BuzzFeed News*, March 6, 2016.

cific to trans women.<sup>10</sup> Transmisogyny amounts to a mingling of both what Serano categories as “traditional sexism” – the valuing of the male over the female – and “oppositional sexism” – defining males and females against each other into rigidly discrete categories). In apparently abdicating their potential as men, trans women are at once discomforting in their boundary-breaching conduct, seemingly degenerate.

While progress from this point has been uneven, the decade since *Whipping Girl*'s publication has been eventful, and its ideas seem to have played an influential role in trans women overcoming our isolation, and asserting ourselves.

And yet the account of trans (and cis) womanhood given in the book still provides an obstacle for systemic understandings of gendered oppression, due to its stance on the origins of transgender identities. By Serano's account, sex identification forms one bedrock layer of innate self:

Subconscious sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation represent separate gender inclinations that are determined largely independent of one another....These gender inclinations are, to some extent, intrinsic to our persons... and generally remain intact despite societal influences and conscious attempts by individuals to purge, repress, or ignore them.

Serano proposes a sociologically identifiable variation: “each of these inclinations roughly correlates with physical set, resulting in a bimodal distribution pattern (i.e., two overlapping bell curves) similar to that seen for other gender differences, such as height.” One might possess a body expected from a man in a range of ways, without in fact possessing the innate disposition for identifying as such. Trans embodiment can be seen as women occupying atypical forms, rather than ontologically distinct “trans women” distinguished from “natal women.”

Serano therefore asserts a differentiation between a “core sex” and gender as expressed, adding these to sexual orientation (already widely accepted as unresponsive to “conversion therapies” and other conscious methods of alteration). For Serano, each of these discrete fields remains invariant: one might be a butch lesbian woman who is living out denial through presenting as an effeminate heterosexual man, but only at the expense of a series of repressive mechanisms and disavowals of one's core self.

Importantly, Serano at this stage exposes her reliance on a *psychological* account of gender experience. Much work is done in this model by the concepts of “repression” and “denial,” a weighting which has surely proven very helpful in its broad establishment as an activist “common sense.” As contemporary thought bends towards reflexive vulgar Freudianism, both trans activists and those they speak with find this account satisfying. (Of course, a reliance on Freud was also not absent from discourse of 1970s gender abolitionists.)

Serano attempts to place herself as a mediation between social constructionism and gender essentialism.<sup>11</sup> Contrasting herself to the latter, she writes:

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<sup>10</sup> Serano has returned to this term innumerable times across her career, but the most succinct introduction is a page-long, purpose written “Trans-misogyny primer.”

<sup>11</sup> Serano's follow-up book *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* is exclusively dedicated to this theme, coining the phrase “gender artifactualism” to distinguish variations on social constructivism. Serano is more amenable to arguments from those which refer to gender as “just a construct.” I will primarily reply to the etiological arguments made in *Whipping Girl* rather than this later work, since they have clearly found greater traction, and because I agree with Serano that both feminist and queer circles have often proven exclusionary towards trans women. My intention here is certainly not to negate Serano's introduction and development of trans misogyny.

Among gender essentialists, it's generally assumed that genetic (and subsequent anatomical and hormonal) differences between females and males are the ultimate source for these behavioral differences. Despite their insistence, such direct links between specific genes and specific gendered behaviors in humans continue to remain elusive.<sup>12</sup>

Although agnostic on this front, *Whipping Girl* is clearly committed to some core trans identification standing as an immutable feature. For Serano, the proclivity of particular children towards gender variant behaviors disproves what she sees as the claims of social constructionism:

...a strict social constructionist model does not easily account for exceptional gender expression either. Many girls who are masculine and boys who are feminine show signs of such behavior at a very early age (often before such children have been fully socialized with regard to gender norms), and generally continue to express such behavior into adulthood (despite the extreme amount of societal pressure that we place on individuals to reproduce gender expression appropriate for their assigned sex). This strongly suggests that certain expressions of femininity and masculinity represent deep, subconscious inclinations in a manner similar to those of sexual orientation and subconscious sex. (I use the word "inclination" here as a catchall phrase to describe any persistent desire, affinity, or urge that predisposes us toward particular gender and sexual expressions and experiences.)<sup>13</sup>

Through this appeal to both biology and psychology, Serano attempts to extend core gender identification into the realm of "physical facts." The upshot is that core gender identification is effectively *depoliticized*. It exists as an innate truth which societies either successfully make cultural space for realizing as a meaningful subjectivity, or else fail to. The resolution Serano's analysis points towards is a simple enough sounding matter of recognition. Transphobia here exists as a social defect, especially prevalent in societies which lack an organizing representational "third" gender category. The plight of trans women in the West is to live in societies where their efforts remain politically contested, and culturally disparaged.

From this position, the prejudices faced by trans women can be simply cast as mere sexism: trans women's oppression is ultimately indistinct in origins to that faced by any other women. While certainly subversive, this argument promotes a dismissal of abolitionist approaches to gender.

From this perspective, the abolition of gender is an aim which can be considered equivalent to the abolition of freckles. Gender arises as an innate variation which each society must ensure it accommodates. The violence trans women face has its appropriate end through combating prejudices against them, and establishing a secure identity of trans womanhood. This vision has proven compelling for a considerable number of trans activists, and has come to form a bedrock "common sense" with a success quite remarkable given her book is less than a decade old.

#### *Serano Against Butler*

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*Excluded*'s tracing of the similar treatment given to trans women and bisexuals of whatever gender is especially astute. See Julia Serano, "What is Gender Artifactualism," *Whipping Girl*, November 4, 2013; and the excerpt from *Excluded* published in *The Advocate*, November 7, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 189

<sup>13</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 190

Serano's opposition to social construction strays into an ill-conceived attack on one of the thesis's more famous proponents, Judith Butler. Serano explicitly advances her biologically informed account with a view towards discrediting the perspective of Butler, who she mischaracterizes as believing gender to be simply "performance."

As this interview with Butler makes clear, the stakes in discussion of gender as performative are quite distinct from gender expression as mere performance:

It is important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject...I begin with the Foucauldian premise that power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects. But then, when one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it's clear that one's already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. It is at this point that it's useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performative speech acts in particular – understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than asserting gender identity as a fixed construct, Butler's interest is *construction*: the narrative and declarative process which any subject uses to gender themselves.

Serano alone cannot bear the blame for a misunderstanding relating to this notoriously unhelpfully worded passage of Butler. Inevitably, anyone invested in gender politics across the past three decades has encountered activists describing themselves as proponents of Butler who have perpetuated this misunderstanding.<sup>15</sup> However, once this is resolved, there is little in Serano's account that does much to damage Butler's position of gender as *performative*. Indeed those inspired by Serano's efforts to outline trans identity as an underlying psychologically fixed ur-truth are nothing if not examples of performative formation of subjectivity.

*Nevada*, a 2013 novel written by veteran trans activist Imogen Binnie, which has enjoyed cult success within trans culture, describes its sardonic protagonist's experiences with a workplace transition. Recounting her time as an employee at a New York bookshop, Binnie writes of her protagonist:

Then when she had been working there a year or two, she had this kind of intense and scary realization that for a really long time, as boring and clichéd as this is, but for as long as she could remember, she had felt all fucked up.

So she wrote about it. She laid it out and connected all these dots: the sometimes I want to wear dresses dot, the I am addicted to masturbation dot, the I feel like I have been punched in the stomach when I see an un-self-conscious pretty girl dot, the I cried a lot when I was little and don't think I've cried at all since puberty dot. Lots of other dots. A constellation of dots. The oh man do I get more fucked up than I mean to, every time I start drinking dot. The I might hate sex dot. So she figured out that she was trans, told people she was changing her name, got on hormones, it was very difficult and rewarding and painful.

Whatever. It was a Very Special Episode.

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<sup>14</sup> "Gender as Performance: An interview with Judith Butler," *Radical Philosophy* 67 (Summer 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Binnie's protagonist's treatment in *Nevada* suggests Serano, in turn, has received similar treatment of subsumption into orthodoxy: "Her name is Julia Serano and like most figureheads, she's very smart and sweet and right-on and almost entirely unproblematic, but her acolytes totally get obnoxious, taking her writings as doctrine."

Binnie's pointed sarcasm indicates how commonplace this process of "autobiographical reconstruction" has become for trans women. Author Casey Plett has described the phenomenon as the "gender novel," which reduces trans characters to their gender condition.<sup>16</sup> Plett argues that a pervasive pressure to account for transgender identity (to settle what is currently unsettling) both hamstring the fiction of cisgender authors, and increasingly obliges trans writers to "tell their story," without ever being heeded.

While trans authors have increasingly chafed at the limits of this imperative towards the confessional style, it seems unlikely to subside. Increasingly, this predicament is being confronted through formally imaginative means. Writer and poet Merritt K's *Internet Murder Revenge Fantasy* presents a phenomenological tableau of varied styles, with a different artist producing each page. The resulting comic restlessly depicts the alienation, isolation, and heavy internet use commonplace for many transgender teenager. K's protagonist oscillates between repression and polymorphous perversity, incessantly adopting an abstractive array of therapeutic guises and personae. K's graphic teenage memoir neither celebrates the bygone cyber culture of the '00s, nor elides its potential. The comic concludes with an exuberantly vindictive screed towards 4Chan trolls reminiscent of the caps lock rants, much more commonplace in an earlier internet still unmoored from the social media era's coercive respectability.<sup>17</sup>

In each of these accounts, denied womanhood realized in adulthood serves as a personal revelation through which years of prior confusion can be made sense of, both gradually and dramatically. From the newly realized position of trans womanhood (explicitly and frankly outlined by Binnie, implicitly alluded to by K), prior life can be reassessed often painfully, but sometimes amusingly. A *post facto* reappraisal of one's life prior to transition occupies the minds of many trans women. This can continue for many years after transition begins, as is often the case for those overcoming any major episode of denial. Allowing for a new kind of performative re-imagining of one's earlier life (you were always a girl, you just weren't yet aware) is partly responsible for Serano's remarkable popularity among trans women, and trans people more generally. There is no damage done to the "legitimacy" of trans womanhood by accepting gender's status as performative, and Serano has not achieved the refutation of Butler she believes she has.

#### *The Hard Limits of Institutional Reformism*

Despite her outstanding achievement as an influential thinker, Serano's political priorities are set with hard limits which directly follow from her social analysis. Serano's activism, while highly successful in its own terms, demonstrates of her ideological commitments to reform of capitalist society, and its existing institutions.

Serano has made a tireless effort to delegitimize the transphobic analysis of sexologists Ray Blanchard and Michael Bailey, more recently advanced by popular science writer Alice Dreger.<sup>18</sup> Her blog features a proliferation of articles written personally, and a continual cataloguing of research done from an informed viewpoint on trans women. For years she has particularly targeted

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Casey Plett, "The Rise of the Gender Novel," *The Walrus*, November 18, 2015; and on pressured towards self-limitation, simplification and reduction on the part of trans authors, see Plett's short piece on the CBC website, "More fear, more love, more honesty: A call for intimacy in works from marginalized writers," May 4, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Merritt K, *Internet Murder Revenge Fantasy* (2015). See also the interview with *Vice Motherboard*, March 3, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> The "autogynephilia" thesis attempts to taxonomize trans women between "homosexuals" (i.e. trans women interested in men) and tranvestite fetishists. This exercise does not warrant any detailed critique here, it will suffice to say that is a clear continuation of earlier efforts to cast all trans people as pathologically damaged "paraphiliacs." That such schema are even presented for discussion reflects mostly on the disastrous state of "sexology" as a research field.

the foremost practitioner of “reparative” (conversion) therapy, Canadian psychologist Kenneth Zucker. Zucker’s “reparative” approach was a holdover from openly homophobic therapies of the past, pioneered by Joseph Nicolosi (founder of NARTH). Nicolosi’s techniques were used unsuccessfully by psychiatrists in an effort to repress homosexual desire in adult men, while Zucker encouraged parents to refuse their children affection on the grounds of “inappropriate” gendered behavior. Understandably, ending the use of “reparative” practices on transgender children has been a consistent focus for activism by trans women, sometimes supported by other LGBT activists.

Between Serano’s writings and the efforts of local activists across many years, conversion practices were outlawed in Toronto in 2015, and Zucker’s Child Youth and Family Gender Identity Clinic was closed in December of the same year. This can only be seen as a victory for Serano, as well as a clear sign of progress in reducing the harm done to gender variant children by the medical profession. Triumphs of this kind should of course be celebrated, on the rare occasions they do occur. But an ending regulatory violence enacted from generation to generation would require a revolutionary movement.

Serano’s activism political activity hinges on agitating for reform. This aim of discrediting actively destructive practices is not to be dismissed out of hand. Targeting the medical establishment has a long history in LGBT activism, from the direct action campaigns which saw homosexuality declassified as a mental illness to the (on-going) efforts by ACT UP to confront pharmaceutical company profiteering from STI medications, and slow peddling of HIV research.

The focus of Serano and other trans activists on improving the prospects of children passing through the care of medical institutions is reminiscent of intersex activism, with similar predicaments. Intersex activism remains focused primarily on the goal of ending the commonplace “corrective” surgery performed arbitrarily on infants and children born with “ambiguous” genitals. (Today termed Intersex Genital Mutilation.)<sup>19</sup> On an international level, intersex activists have achieved remarkable breakthroughs in ensuring the EU and UN classify Intersex Genital Mutilation as torture, and a violation of “basic rights,” yet these medical practices remain widespread across the world (outlawed altogether only in Malta).<sup>20</sup> It’s also unclear how effective any ban would be at actually preventing IGM surgeries. A worrying point of comparison is Indonesia, where legislation against Female Genital Mutilation (installed in the face of international pressure) did very little to end the widespread practice of childhood clitoral cutting. (Today the majority of these surgeries are performed by trained medical professionals, as with male circumcisions).<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the legislation outlawing the practice is formally repealed, in Indonesia it has already become *de facto* void. Clearly state power and NGO complexes are unreliable allies, at best.

The “decentralized” nature of this medicalized violence demonstrates the pervasive nature of gender demarcation, and how undoing its harm extends well beyond defeating the state,

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<sup>19</sup> Outlawing and abolishing IGM is a demand supported with near unanimous consensus among intersex activists. The most effective group operating at international NGO/transnational state lobbying presently is OII Europe.

<sup>20</sup> See: UN Free & Equal: Intersex Awareness; the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, “The Fundamental Rights Situation of Intersex People”; Naomi Larsson, “Is the World Finally Waking Up to Intersex Rights?” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2016; Azeen Ghorayshi, “Intersex Surgeries Are A Human Rights Violation, Says U.N. Group,” *BuzzFeed News*, September 19, 2015; and The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “A step forward for intersex visibility and human rights,” September 25, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> In Indonesia, 53.2% of FGM was performed by medical professionals by this 2013 survey, six years after the practice was supposedly outlawed.

passing the correct laws, or reforming the professions. For as long as gendered violence is performed through professional bodies and medical institutions, disputing their legitimacy (not simply drawing on it) will remain a practical priority.

Even in the case of official bodies radically transforming their approaches towards transgender and intersex children, intergenerational abuse will remain widespread. The bulk of gender-based neglect and violence during parenting will never be overseen by a medical professional. If the medical establishment halts conversion efforts, private “camps” run by amateur gender enforcers will remain available throughout the US for parents intent on curbing their children’s “deviant” behavior. Abuse arises not only from the instruction of the remaining psychiatric conversionists, but from the institution of the family itself. Gender substantiating violence is often performed by mothers fulfilling their unpaid obligations as the foremost reproducers of society across generations.<sup>22</sup>

Heterosexual families are prone to trying to recreate themselves in their own image. While Zucker doubtless encouraged some parents who otherwise would have proven more tolerant to mistreat their children through denying them affection, primarily his patients were introduced to him by parents hoping that their progeny’s supposedly deviant behavior could be made to desist. “Reparative” therapy certainly formalized and encouraged parental behavior which occurs irrespective of intervention from the medical profession. Even the most radical transformation of formally constituted institutions will serve a limited role in ending gender oppression, since much formative-developmental violence occurs through informal or “loose” organizations: families, peer groups, romantic relationships, and other social environments which make up the everyday; and inevitably also workplaces.

In other words, reforming public bodies will not shift the harm done to trans girls and women through private households, which are currently tasked with most upbringings. Without the end of the family and wage labor, destitution will remain the fate of many trans women and children. If there is to be emancipation for trans women, it will not come through a long march through the institutions.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Nat Raha has described a drift within some sections of LGBT activism towards “trans liberalism” which she juxtaposes with a revolutionary politics defined by “the understanding that another world is necessary and is already being created in which trans lives may flourish.”<sup>23</sup> It’s not simply a lack of will which produces this tendency: while many trans women share the radical convictions of the recently released Chelsea Manning, many lack the apparent strategic opportunity she bravely took advantage of. Participation in the mesh of state services and desiccating NGO bodies can prove hard to avoid.

“Trans liberalism” is an inevitable feature of the objective shifts underway within society: undoubtedly the stigmatization, unfamiliarity and ignorance trans women face in much of the world has began to diminish. Many will still hope to style themselves as respectable subjects, with all

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<sup>22</sup> Mario Mieli’s 1977 work, *Towards A Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, indeed contains an analysis of mutual damage between homosexuals and women which would urge against any straightforward pro-women identity politics misleading us into siding with homophobic mothers against their “sons”: “For centuries, the system has exploited the work of homosexuals to subjugate women, just as it has made abundant use of women to oppress gays (any gay man need only recall his mother).” Mieli’s book was recently retranslated and republished by Pluto Press.

<sup>23</sup> Nat Raha, “The Limits of Trans Liberalism,” *Verso Blog*, September 21, 2015

the tacitly reactionary commitments this entails. But the very paucity of what the conventional political establishment has to offer to most trans women is striking. It seems likely a relatively high proportion of trans women will be involved in emancipatory political activism of one kind or another. Many trans women have found our way to revolutionary politics not because we are virtuous, but because we are regularly exposed to the worst in the world. The conditions of trans women should be addressed as a concrete lived predicament, which will ultimately find political redress through revolutionary action.

For our part, trans women can learn from communist theory to reject the current false debate offered by the various wings of various capitalist states, and firms keen to remain abreast of the latest means of demonstrating “Corporate Social Responsibility.” The protections on offer to trans people via state liberalism and corporate sponsors are so many empty promises and piecemeal measures. Much of the worst violence trans people live with is done during childhood, by parents and other legally mandated guardians. Much more is done by prison systems, police and other arms of the state which reformists and liberals have no answer to, and tacitly wish to leave in place. That discussion arises at all between capitalist parties demonstrates the confusion elicited by those outside of the norms and procedures of the heterosexual family: transgender identities provide a faultline in the expected reproduction of society across generations. Our role as communists is not to provide cover to this fissure, but to ask: what weaknesses are presented by this breach we are forced to live along? Our theory acknowledges and draws from the existing activity which makes of subsistence and social reproduction and embraces the implications of a society where this could proceed without continual coercion towards exploitation.

To say that trans women live their womanhood as a contradictory condition is to describe our plight, but also to point towards a tension which has developed for historical reasons, as well as a political resolution. All communists should offer their support to those in these conditions, with campaigns around struggles within the workplace and beyond it.

The theoretical project which Marxists can best contribute to is the denaturalizing of the popularly assumed, exposing false differences and collapsing arbitrary differentiation. This work has been ongoing, taken up through a diverse array of trans activism projects. Communist theory has lagged for decades in contributing to this undertaking (the same cannot be said for anarchism), and the damage done to it by such neglect will take years to correct. All the same, Marxism’s ability to grasp contradiction presents a fruitful alternative to the shallow assumption of transphobia as a corruption of society, rather than one of its foundations.

Trans liberation through communism is suggested by the already existing activity of trans women who have fashioned some kind of life for so many of ourselves, even in the face of trans-misogyny and exploitation. Communist theory should contribute to the abolition of these features of society, opposing their (currently ubiquitous) ideological naturalization.

The hope offered to trans women by communism is that our plight cannot only be described, then explained, but also ended.



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