

TRANS*: A QUICK & QUIRKY ACCOUNT OF GENDER VARIABILITY

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.

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.**

Judith 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 did 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 inquiries. We all stand in the space she created.

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, a gender-variant woman was similarly unthinkable for continental philosophy and psychoanalysis. But Butler never implied that gender variability meant gender flexibility. Indeed, *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 a choice; 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 *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998). Prosser asked what effect a theory of gender performativity had had on an 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.



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, Jason 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. Of course, these readings of performativity depended upon a prior mischaracterization of performativity as flexibility. 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. 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. Cárdenas also focuses upon an amplified understanding of “realness” and she has written texts on what she calls “The Transreal.”

In the new landscapes of power and domination that are emerging at the beginning of the shift from the **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 everyone.

Jack Halberstam

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