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R E A D I N G / S U S A N S T R Y K E R

**Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question**

Many years ago, I paid a visit to my son’s kindergarten room for parent-teacher night. Among the treats in store for us parents that evening was a chance to look at the *My Body* book that each child had prepared over the past few weeks of classes. Each page was blank except for a pre-printed line that said “My favorite color is (blank),” or “My favorite food is (blank),” or “My favorite story is (blank),” students were supposedly to fill in the blanks with their favorite things and draw an accompanying picture. My son had filled the blanks and empty spaces of his book with many such things as “green,” “pizza,” and “Gandhi Nighttime,” but I was unprepared for his response to “My favorite animal is (blank).” His favorite animal was *yowza.* I looked up at the teacher, who had been watching me in anticipation of this response. “Yowza?” I said, and she, barely suppressing her glee, said, “Yeah.”

But I had no idea what was the word he had written, and it just made the category animal seem more interesting.

At the risk of suggesting that the category “woman” is somehow not interesting enough, without a transgender supplement, which is certainly not my intent, I have to confess that there is a sense in which “woman,” as a category of human passebondeau, is indeed, for one, not interesting when we include transgender phenomena within its rubric. The work required to encompass transgender within the bounds of womanhood makes woman’s studies, and queer feminist theorizing, in important and necessary directions. It takes us so directly into the basic questions of the gender distinction, and of the concept of a sex/gender system, that lie at the heart of Anglophone feminism. Once there, transgen...
to their logical conclusion (biology is not destiny, and one is not born a woman, right?) And yet, transgender or otherwise frequently found to reify the basic conceptual and representational framework within which the category "woman" has been conventionally understood, deployed, embodied, and resisted. Perhaps "gender." transgender tells us, is not related to "sex" in quite the same way that an apple is related to the reflection of a red fruit in the mirror; it is not a mimetic relationship. Perhaps "sex" is a category that, like citizenship, can be obtained by the non-native residents of a particular location by following certain procedures. Perhaps gender has a more complex genealogy, as the level of individual psychopathology as an index of collective psychopathology can be grasped or accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender model of European and American psychology. And perhaps the persona shaped by grappling with transgender concerns is relevant to a great many people, including nontransgendered women and men. Perhaps transgender discourses help us think in terms of embedded specificities, as issues of sex's studies has traditionally tried to do, while also giving us a way to think about gender as a system with multiple nodes and positions, as gender studies increasingly requires us to do. Perhaps transgender studies, which emerged in the academy at the intersection of feminism and queer theory over the course of the last decade or so, can be thought of as one productive way to " queer the woman question.

If we define "transgender phenomena" broadly as anything that disrupts or denaturalizes normative gender, and which calls our attention to the pressures through which normativity is produced and stigmatization achieves visibility, "transgender" becomes an incredibly useful and suggestive concept. What might broadly be called "transgender feminism"—a feminism that focuses on marginalized gender expressions as well as normative constructions of sex—may be usefully understood as a way to approach the supposedly naturalized character of sex, and its variously grafted components. As a historian of the United States, my training encourages me to approach current salient questions by moving through the lenses of the past. Questions that matter now, historians are taught to think, are always framed by enabling conditions that precede their presentness. When I ask what I now know about transgender might be, I try to learn what it has already been, but I also add, for example, that the first publication of the post-WWII transgender movement, a short-lived early-1950s magazine called Transvest, was produced by a group calling itself the Transvests in Denver. I not only saw that a group of male transvestites in Southern California had embraced the rhetoric of first-wave feminism and applied the concept of gender equality to the marginalized topic of cross-dressing. I also came to think differently about Annela Bloomer and the antebellum clothing reform movement. To the extent that breaking out of the conventional constriction of womanhood in both a feminist and a transgender practice, what we might conceivably call transgender feminism arguably has been around since the first half of the 19th century. Looking back, it is increasingly obvious that transgender phenomena are not limited to individuals who have "transgendered" personal identities. Rather, they are signposts that point to many different kinds of bodies and subjects, and they can help us see how gender can function as part of a more extensive apparatus of social domination. In particular, those who are threatened by the assumptions about bodies on which social control is not limited to the control of bodies defined as "women's bodies," or the control of female reproductive capacities and processes. In other words, transgender discourses change our understanding of how we subjectively experience our bodies. Through which we recognize the personhood of others (as well as ourselves), because they are categories without which we have great difficulty in recognizing personhood at all, gender also functions as a mechanism of control when some loss of gender status is threatened, or when claims of membership in a gender category are denied. Why is it considered a heterosexist putdown to call some lesbians "menstrual," or that some disabled women are "overtly demanding laborer," or that a middle-class woman serves a certain level of professional accomplishment, is more likely to be gainfully employed and reproduce her sex? Stripping away gender, and insubstantializing gender, are practices of social domination, regulation, and control. And not just individuals, but categories, categories are perpetuated by attaching transgender stigma to various unruly bodies and subject positions, not just to bodies that are "transgendered" or not.

Also, however, a lost history of feminist activism by self-identified transgender people waiting to be recovered. My own historical research into 20th-century transgender communities and identities teaches me that activism on transgender issues were involved in multi-layered political movements in the 1990s and 1980s, including radical feminism. The ascendency of cultural feminism and lesbian separatism by the mid-1970s—both of which cast transgender and related practices, particularly transsexuality, as reactionary patriarchal anachronisms—largely eroded knowledge of this early, transgressive project. The work of Jan Rieker, for example, has been critical to our understanding of transgender activism in the 1970s.
"postmodernity." The overarching tendency of second-wave feminism at the social and cultural level is the political and cultural initiatives that link "women" with "recreational," "natural" with "good," "good" with "true," and "true" with "right." This has been precipitated on an increasingly non-utilitarian modernist epistemology. Within the representational framework of Eurocentric modernity, which posits gender as the superstructural sign of the material referent of sex, transgender practices have been morally condemned as unnatural, bad, false, and wrong, in that they fundamentally misalign the proper relationship between sex and gender. The people who engage in such misrepresentations can be understood only as duped or duplicitous, fools or enemies to be pillaged or scorched. The failure of second-wave feminism to do justice to transgender issues in the 1970s; 1980s, and for that matter is rooted in its more fundamental intellectual failure to recognize the conceptual limits of modernist epistemology and to realize the long history in third-wave feminism begins from a different—postmodern—epistemolog- cal standpoint which imagines new ways for social bodies to signify genders. Within the feminist third wave, and within humanities scholarship in general, transgender phenomena have come to constitute important evidence in recent arguments about essentialism and social construction, performativity and stigmatization, hybridity and fluidity, anti-foundationalist ontologies and non-referential epistemologies, the proliferation of perversities, the collapse of difference, the triumph of technology, the advent of panhumanisms, and the end of the world as we know it. While it is easy to parody the specialized and sometimes alienating jargon of the new science of transgender studies, an evil form of stak- cung, involving as they do the actual as well as theoretical disempowering of power relations that sustain vari- ous social orders (whether on an individual, gender, or race level), I want to talk about the men and women, and about the injustices directed at minorities. Because these debates are critically important, because they constitute an ideological landscape upon which material struggles are waged within the academy for research funds and promotions, for tenure and teaching loads, transgender theorists and philosophers are entitled to acknowledge that society at large, involving as they do the actual as well as theoretical disempowering of power relations that sustain various social orders, is engaged in a series of struggles over fundamental epistemological principles, the collapse of difference, the triumph of technology, the advent of panhumanisms, and the end of the world as we know it. While it is easy to parody the specialized, and sometimes alienating, jargon of the new science of transgender studies, an evil form of stacking, involving as they do the actual as well as theoretical disempowering of power relations that sustain various social orders, whether on an individual, gender, or race level, I want to talk about the men and women, and about the injustices directed at minorities. Because these debates are critically important, because they constitute an ideological landscape upon which material struggles are waged within the academy for research funds and promotions, for tenure and teaching loads, transgender theorists and philosophers are entitled to acknowledge that society at large, involving as they do the actual as well as theoretical disempowering of power relations that sustain various social orders.