

The Rise of the TransFeminists

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published her foundational and groundbreaking text, *The Second Sex*. Book two of *The Second Sex* begins with Beauvoir's most famous assertion, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."¹ This assertion continues to fuel debates among feminists about how to define "woman," a category that is both complex and continuously central to feminism and women's studies. Defining the term "woman" has been and continues to be central to political, ethical, and philosophical debates in feminism. While most academic feminists agree with the premise that gender is, at least to some degree, a cultural construction, the debate about who then 'counts' as a woman is far from settled. Transgender² individuals, and concerns about where sex ends and gender begins, complicate these conversations, leaving feminists with questions and concerns about exactly *who* can become a woman.

Over the course of this essay, I will trace the history of feminist responses to transgender people, specifically transwomen,³ and the continuing question concerning and who "counts" as a woman. Gayle Salamon,⁴ in her essay in *Women's Studies on the Edge*, expresses her belief that "feminism...has not been able to keep pace with non-normative genders as they are thought, embodied and lived."⁵ She frames the "woman question" for

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The second sex* (New York: Knopf, 1971). 267.

² Transgender is generally understood as an umbrella term to describe those who express some degree of gender non-conformity in relation to normative understandings of masculinity and femininity. While this term has been and continues to be contested, I will use it here to refer specifically to transgender men and women who, either through dress, hormones, surgical technologies, or some combination of the three, live as a gender that was *not* assigned to them at birth.

³ The term "transwoman" refers to individuals who were assigned male at birth, but not identify as women (but not necessarily heterosexual).

⁴ It is worth noting that Judith Butler was Salamon's dissertation advisor, as other academic relationships play an important role in the production of the scholarship on transsexuality.

⁵ Gayle Salamon, "Transfeminism and the Future of Gender," in *Women's Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). 115.

women's studies (WS) as a question not of *who counts*, but instead situating the subject "woman" as both necessary and central for WS regardless of definition. Salamon continues, recognizing the "impossibility" facing WS when she asserts that "Women's studies as a contemporary institution... may be politically and theoretically incoherent... because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable 'women' as an object of study."⁶ The emergence of trans-identified women in feminism complicates possible definitions of women based on essentialism (biological or cultural), notions of women based on a lifetime of being identified as "woman." Feminists have continually expanded their framework of "woman" to include intersectional notions of class, race, sexuality, ability, and nationality, and this is one more aspect of identity struggling to be included within frameworks of feminism and femininity.

Movements to place for transpeople, and transwomen in particular, in the conversations are often found not solely in academic circles, but rather in activist circles, many of which include notable transgender academics. Susan Stryker, one of the most well known activists and feminist historians of transgender individuals and communities writes in her *Transgender History* that "one of the goals of this book is to situate transgender social change activism within an expanded feminist framework."⁷ She highlights the main threat transwomen pose to feminism, in that they call into question understandings of "woman" narrowly defined as the cause and foundation for feminism as a movement *for women*, where "woman" has too often been defined as white, heterosexual, and middle class. Stryker explains "transgender feminism, though it has its roots in the feminist radicalism of the late 1960s, is part of what is sometimes now known as the third wave of feminism... [transgender

⁶ Ibid. 118.

⁷ Susan Stryker, *Transgender history*, Seal studies (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008). 3.

feminism] calls into question the usefulness of ‘woman’ as the foundation of all feminist politics.”⁸ This challenge recalls the struggle during the late 1960s and early 70s between lesbian feminists and the mainstream feminist movement where the consternation caused by their questionable sexual practices (sometimes calling into question their “womanhood”) led to their exclusion from various feminist organizations.⁹ As transsexuals garnered attention in the media and among activists, academic feminists could no longer ignore these women in their scholarship.

Instigating a rise of scholarship about transsexuality that gained momentum in the 1990s was Janice Raymond’s infamous polemic against transsexuals, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*¹⁰ published in 1979. She is in part responding to Harry Benjamin’s text, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, published in 1966 that canonized acceptable gender performance, what Sandy Stone refers to as “an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender.”¹¹ *The Transsexual Empire* was the beginning of what Ray Filar, a writer for *The Guardian*, calls “a sub-genre [of radical feminism] which incorrectly uses the label radical feminism as a cover for outright hatred.”¹² He argues that, “part of what sustains [transphobia] is confused ignorance stemming from the uncritical acceptance of writers like Raymond... who have each attempted to normalise transphobia as part of radical feminist criticism.”¹³ Raymond argues for the outright rejection of “male-to-constructed-females”¹⁴

⁸ Ibid. 3.

⁹ One response to this exclusion was the creation of the group the “Lavender Menace” in 1970. The moniker later resurrected and changed slightly by Riki Wilchins and her group the “Transsexual Menace” in 1993.

¹⁰ Janice G. Raymond, *The transsexual empire : the making of the she-male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

¹¹ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *Camera Obscura* 12, no. 2 29 (1992). 160, 163.

¹² Ray Filar, Ray. “You Can’t Smash Patriarchy with Transphobia.” In *the f word: Contemporary UK Feminism*. http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2011/09/radical_feminism_transphobia, 2011.

¹³ Ibid.

from feminist circles. Equating what she understands at the appropriation of the female body by males to rape, she attempts to convince her readers that transsexuals are the dupes of patriarchy, as are the feminists that might accept them. Raymond quickly dismisses any legitimate transsexual desire is nothing more than dissatisfaction with the current sex-role system, that they are “victims of the violence” of patriarchy and sexism.¹⁵ It is this system that cause men to deceive themselves and others that they are women, and sometimes even lesbians. For Raymond, the “transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist”¹⁶ female is the worst offender, gaining entrance into lesbian circles. These individuals are, according to Raymond, raping and invading these communities, either by force or by deception.¹⁷ She concludes her polemic with an appendix entitled “Suggestions for Change.”¹⁸ Here she summarizes her hope for the transsexual community when she argues “transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence.”¹⁹ While the most notable response to this text was not published for another decade, *The Transsexual Empire* is still a well-known, if not little-read text by scholars in Trans*²⁰ and Women’s Studies.

During the interim between Raymond’s text and the many responses that would follow, a major contribution to feminism and theories about transsexuality hailed from Donna Haraway’s continuingly influential essay *Cyborg Manifesto* published in 1991. Haraway

¹⁴ Raymond, *The transsexual empire : the making of the she-male*. x, xvii. Raymond also uses the term “man-made ‘she-males,’” xvii.

¹⁵ Talia Bettcher, “Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2009).

¹⁶ Raymond, *The transsexual empire : the making of the she-male*. 100.

¹⁷ Ibid. 103, 104.

¹⁸ Ibid. 178-185.

¹⁹ Ibid. 178.

²⁰ The asterisk following the word “trans” is rising in popularity in activist and academic communities to indicate the multitude of possible endings to the word and is intended to be as inclusive as possible when referring to the study of this very complex community (i.e., transwoman, transman, transsexual, transgender, etc...)

provided a new way of thinking about hybridity as she blurred not only the boundaries between human and machine, but also between genders. "The boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us,"²¹ and she understands the cyborg as dismantling the dualisms of organism and machine, self and other, and also of male and female. This questioning of the dualism of male and female calls into question and destabilizes the category of woman. She encouraged her readers and her students to perform this deconstruction of categories; her manifest was, "an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction."²²

In 1992 Sandy Stone, Donna Haraway's student, published the most famous response to Raymond's polemic.²³ Heavily influenced by Haraway's theoretical approach, Stone connects colonial discourse and rhetoric to concepts of transsexuality, arguing that just as women have been theorized by men, so too are transwomen theorized by ciswomen.²⁴ A similarity arises when one examines the scholarship, that,

as with genetic women, transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert, and destroy 'true' women. In this construction as well, the transsexuals have been resolutely complicit by failing to develop an effective counterdiscourse.²⁵

²¹ Donna Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991). 294.

²² Ibid. 292.

²³ During this time, Mary Daly (Janice Raymond's dissertation advisor) published *Gyn/Ecology*, drawing a comparison between Frankenstein's monster and transsexuality.

²⁴ The term "ciswomen" refers to individuals who were assigned female at birth and identify as woman.

²⁵ Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." 163.

Stone, however, discusses how difficult it is to generate a counterdiscourse when one “is programmed to disappear,”²⁶ when transwomen are being dismissed *as* women and therefore their voices are dismissed as illegitimate and unable to express an authentic experience. Some feminists argue that transwomen are not real women because they have not spent a lifetime dealing with sexist oppression. Sandy Stone acknowledges this difference; “transsexuals...do not share common oppression prior to gender reassignment.”²⁷ However, she goes on to articulate an specific experience of oppression for transsexuals, offering that we might think of transsexuals as a “*genre* – a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored.”²⁸ While Stone was attempting to expand the possibilities of desire and identity for transsexuals, another feminist scholar was turning it back onto the very ciswomen that critiqued Stone and other transsexual women.

In 1990, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*. This text, while not the first to suggest the constructed nature of gender, firmly planted theories of gender in the realm of performance. This text and Butler’s “theorizations of performative identity have been described as the sine qua non of postmodern feminism.”²⁹ Engaging directly with the question of what counts as “woman,” Butler engages Beauvoir and argues that “if there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a *woman*, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to

²⁶ Ibid. 163.

²⁷ Ibid. 164.

²⁸ Ibid. 165.

²⁹ Sara Salih, *Judith Butler*, Routledge critical thinkers (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002). 44.

originate or to end.”³⁰ Butler was not the first, but became one of the most notable feminists, to highlight the performative and constructed nature of femininity and gender for all women, both trans- and cis- women.

Following the foundational feminist texts of Butler, Haraway, and Stone that provided more complex and positive views of womanhood and transsexuality. A new generation of scholarship began to emerge. Much like the development of feminist consciousness from the ground up, transgender awareness and feminism developed in much the same way. A swell of consciousness in the 1990s was grounded not solely in academic circles – much of this awareness came from community based publications and pamphlets.³¹ Sandy Stone’s response to Janice Raymond helped “give the nascent ‘transgender’ movement an intellectual as well as a political agenda.”³² Susan Stryker, as an activist and scholar as well as one of the most prolific scholars writing about transgender histories and communities, began publishing in the mid-1990s. These activists and scholars continued the important work of critically interrogating the notion that “individuals have a right to adopt any form of gender expression they choose.”³³

However, much like the contested definition of *woman*, the uncritical acceptance of any gender identity is heavily criticized. Cressida Heyes, a feminist philosopher, is wary of this “anything goes” gender expression, that if we are to engage in and create transformative feminist alliances, we must move beyond, “individuals making normatively equal gender

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). 33.

³¹ Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *Camera Obscura* 12, no. 2 29 (1992): 150-76.

³² Stryker, *Transgender history*.124.

³³ Patricia Elliot, *Debates in transgender, queer, and feminist theory : contested sites*, Queer interventions (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2010). 29.

choices,”³⁴ that we must recognize and deconstruct systemic and oppressive gender norms. Many transsexual feminists, now often referred to by the neologism *transfeminist*, take up this challenge in productive and nuanced ways. Emi Koyama, a transfeminist, writes, “instead of claiming that we have never benefited from male supremacy, we need to assert that our experiences represent a dynamic interaction between male privilege and the disadvantage of being trans.”³⁵ She advocates for a more nuanced understanding of privilege and oppression, and that instead of excluding or discounting transwomen, feminists need to begin to recognize the particularities of their oppression, not as identical to ciswomen’s, but equally problematic in our culture of male supremacy. She believes that transwomen need feminism, but that feminism also needs the unique perspectives offered by transwomen, as well as their activism and scholarship.

Gayle Salamon recognizes the need for feminism within transgender studies and argues that feminism provides a crucial historical grounding for the emergence of gender as a political category, and without this context transgender studies would flounder. The emergence of trans* studies and scholarship is largely produced out of “social sciences – anthropology and sociology... much of the current work on trans issues is emerging from the humanities, and surprisingly little of this work is house in women’s studies departments.”³⁶ What would seem like a natural alliance, where women’s studies offers decades of theoretical research and tools on the emergence, development, “perpetuation, and transgression – and

³⁴ Cressida J Heyes, “Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender,” *Signs* 28, no. 4 (2003). 1117.

³⁵ Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2003). 248.

³⁶ Salamon, “Transfeminism and the Future of Gender.” 116.

the ways embodiment, identity, and social structures are shaped by gender productions,”³⁷ too often this work is housed in other departments, perhaps largely due to these decades of tension over the inclusion of transwomen in women’s spaces, including WS departments.

Viviane Namaste moves in a different direction when she suggests that the “question of identity... is no longer valuable...[we must] move beyond questions of identity”³⁸ and “that it is only when we get *beyond* these questions that we can address the more pressing issues of ‘civil status, access to health care...’”³⁹ However, she too quickly dismisses questions of identity that remain important for feminists and transsexuals, specifically questions that are implicated by consequences of identity. If feminist epistemologies concerning the term *woman* and its definition are transparent and part of the dialogue, “it might open up the question of who gets to decide what the terms of inclusion or exclusion in feminist organizations might be while simultaneously exposing the political strategies enlisted in refusing to recognize transsexual women as women.”⁴⁰

Patricia Elliot, a feminist scholar writing on the debates in trans*, feminist, and queer theory, makes an explicit observation that how we define “woman” and “gender,” “obviously extend[s] beyond the matter of including transwomen in feminist organizations to more deep-seated concerns with how feminism addresses differences with its others, including difference in understanding sexual politics.”⁴¹ Many responses to transwomen are, and continue to be, decidedly hostile responses, responses informed by fear, ignorance, hate, but also rooted in a very real difference of opinion of who counts a woman. The development of

³⁷ Ibid. 116.

³⁸ Viviane K. Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2005). 3.

³⁹ Ibid. x, 3.

⁴⁰ Elliot, *Debates in transgender, queer, and feminist theory: contested sites*. 30.

⁴¹ Ibid. 12.

transfeminism, and its use of theoretical tools from feminism, trans*, and queer theory allows transfeminists to develop sophisticated responses to accusations of deception or inauthenticity, to expand their arguments beyond pedestrian questions of “womanhood” towards larger concerns about systems of oppression and how these systems affect us at the intersections of transphobia, sexism, racism, classism, and ableism.

New scholarship by transfeminists are addressing these intersectional issues, and pushing feminism to examine these topics from a different perspectives Eve Ensler, in 2004, helped produce an all transwoman cast of *The Vagina Monologues*.⁴² Julia Serano published *Whipping Girl* and coined the neologism “transmisogyny,” helping to bring attention to the particular mix of transphobia and misogyny that transwomen face on a daily basis.⁴³ Camp Trans is still active and engaged in protest against the exclusion of self-identified transsexuals from the Michigan Womyn’s music festival. More feminist studies readers include at least one, if not more, articles and essay by, for, and about transsexuality, introducing the topic to introductory WS classes across the U.S. Emi Koyama, writer of the “Transfeminist Manifesto,” actively writes a blog discussing the issues and politics of transsexuals at the intersection of feminism.⁴⁴

Riki Wilchins, another notable activist and academic, in 2002 described her experience of speaking to the National Organization for Women’s National Board on transgender inclusion. She articulates a position that problematizes our culture rather than the “condition” of transsexuality, arguing that transsexuals are not trapped in the wrong bodies,

⁴² Eve Ensler Josh Aronson, “Beautiful Daughters,” (Logo, 2004).

⁴³ Julia Serano, *Whipping girl: a transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Emi Koyama to Eminism.org: Putting the Emi back in Feminism since 1975.

they are trapped in the wrong culture and the wrong medico-legal discourse that pathologizes and dismisses transsexuals as mentally ill. She believes that instead of new terms and labels, we as feminists need a new foundation for our politics that recognizes that gender trouble cannot be contained by “trans” identities, but the gender trouble is all around us; that we must take it as “self-evident that the mainspring of homophobia is gender.”⁴⁵ As scholarship on trans* identities, issues, and politics continues to proliferate in academia and in activist communities, the question of trans* inclusion will continue to be relevant for feminists and for scholars across disciplines. As many WS departments are expanding the purview of their scholarship to include gender and sexuality, this topic will continue to be particularly relevant for feminists and women’s studies.

⁴⁵ Riki Wilchins, “Gender Rights are Human Rights,” in *GenderQueer*, ed. Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins (New York: Alyson Books, 2002). 294.

Bibliography

- Anne, Enke. "Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category (Review)." *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 2 (2009): 198-203.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York,: Knopf, 1971.
- Bettcher, Talia. "Feminist Persepctives on Trans Issues." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2009.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Cole, C. L., and L. C. Cate Shannon. "Compulsory Gender and Transgender Existence: Adrienne Rich's Queer Possibility." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3-4 (2008): 279-87.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology : The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.
- Elliot, Patricia. *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory : Contested Sites*. Queer Interventions. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2010.
- Filar, Ray. "You Can't Smash Patriarchy with Transphobia." In *the f word: Contemporary UK Feminism*.
http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2011/09/radical_feminism_transphobia, 2011.
- Haraway, Donna. "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : The Reinvention of Nature*. 127-48. London: Free Association, 1991.
- Heyes, Cressida J. "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender." *Signs* 28, no. 4 (2003): 1093-120.
- Josh Aronson, Eve Ensler. "Beautiful Daughters." 46:16: Logo, 2004.
- Koyama, Emi. In *Eminism.org: Putting the Emi back in Feminism since 1975*. *eminism.org*.
 ———. "The Transfeminist Manifesto." In *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, edited by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier. Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2003.
 ———. "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate." In *Eminism*. <http://www.eminism.org>: Eminism.org: Putting the Emi back in Feminism since 1975, 2000.
- Moi, Toril. *What Is a Woman? : And Other Essays*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Namaste, Viviane K. *Invisible Lives : The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
 ———. *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*. Toronto: Women's Press, 2005.
- Raymond, Janice G. *The Transsexual Empire : The Making of the She-Male*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.

- Roberts, Monica. "We Black Trans People Need to Know Our Black Trans History." In *TransGriot*. <http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2011/10/we-black-trans-people-need-to-know-our.html>, 2011.
- . "Why the Trans Community Hates Dr. Janice G. Raymond." In *TransGriot*. <http://transgriot.blogspot.com/2010/09/why-trans-community-hates-dr-janice-g.html>, 2010.
- Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body : Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- . "Transfeminism and the Future of Gender." In *Women's Studies on the Edge*, edited by Joan Wallach Scott. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler*. Routledge Critical Thinkers. London ; New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *Camera Obscura* 12, no. 2 29 (1992): 150-76.
- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Seal Studies. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008.
- Stryker, Susan, and Stephen Whittle. *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender : An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Whittle, Stephen. "Where Did We Go Wrong? Feminism and Trans Theory - Two Teams on the Same Side?" In *True Spirit Conference*. Alexandria, VA, 2000.
- Wilchins, Riki. "Gender Rights Are Human Rights." In *Genderqueer*, edited by Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins. New York: Alyson Books, 2002.

"as we look more deeply into not just the history of women, but the history of the category of 'women,' we can ask what the political stakes in creating and enforcing false and simplistic dichotomies like male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine are. It has become increasingly apparent that these binary structures benefit a presumptive and compulsive heterosexual economy."

(60) read my lips.