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On Gender Neutrality: Derrida and Transfeminism in Conversation

MARIE DRAZ

THERE IS ALREADY A LONG HISTORY of conversation between feminism and deconstruction, feminist theorists and Derrida or Derrideans. That conversation has been by turns fraught and constructive. While some of these interactions have occurred in queer feminism, to date little has been done to stage an engagement between deconstruction and transfeminism. Naysayers might think that transfeminism is too recent and too identitarian a discourse to meaningfully interact with Derrida's legacy. On the other hand, perhaps Derrida's work was too embedded in second wave feminism, and in some cases implicit misogyny and transphobia, to meet transfeminism on its own playing field. And yet, I think both suspicions shortchange these discourses. In what follows, I stage a conversation between Derrida and two writers working in the area of transfeminism: Paisley Currah and Julia Serano. I explore, in particular, how their conceptions of gender neutrality or gender pluralism are complementary and together change the so-called "question of woman" from a philosophical and political perspective.

In a recent blog post (2016), Paisley Currah reflects on the willingness of major corporations like Facebook and Apple to boycott states with anti-LGBT laws. He compares this to a relative lack of corporate interest in boycotting states with antiabortion laws. As a transgender studies scholar, Currah is especially interested in the role of trans politics in these respective debates over LGBT and women's rights. Trans politics often extends feminist insights about gender norms by more directly contesting the very necessity (and often violent effects) of assigned sex

in the first place. Accordingly, the term “transgender” has come to encompass multiple ways in which one might depart from the gendered expectations given at birth. Trans politics, therefore, takes the proliferation of gender difference, rather than the affirmation of a sexed essence, as a central goal. As Currah puts it, “For all those many kinds of people under the transgender umbrella, politics focuses now on all the ways in which gender can be remixed: from the now traditional male-to-female and female-to-male transition trajectories to genderqueer to non-binary.” Nevertheless, Currah wonders, how has this emphasis on gender pluralism, or the expansion of possibilities for gendered identities and practices, affected the interplay between trans and feminist politics?

Currah hypothesizes that the gender pluralism pursued by some strands of transgender politics (including, he notes, his own earlier work) has resulted in the loss of an ability to diagnose the continued “subordination” of women (including trans women). This is tied to a residual gender “asymmetry.” Such a politics, then, seems potentially unaccountable to the way in which “one’s position toward the feminine end of the continuum (if not the binary) still has effects,” effects of silencing, violence, and even death. As the proliferation of gender identities becomes an important political goal, Currah asks what has happened to the focus on misogyny and sexism. Has an emphasis on gender pluralism lessened our ability to analyze the differential effects of power and history depending on one’s gender location? In other words, while the critique of an ahistorical, universalizing account of sexual difference was (and continues to be) necessary, it is also important to identify what else has been lost in this process. Currah, therefore, ends his reflective piece by calling for a “transgender feminist approach that is not gender-neutral—that dares to identify asymmetry when it sees it.”

Derrida’s work to deconstruct the notion of woman (and thereby, some have argued, the entire gender system) is largely consistent with this characterization of some threads of trans theory today, especially as such threads intertwine with queer theory. The two steps in the process of deconstruction are one way of telling this history: first, privilege the subordinate term and, second, upset the binary itself, thereby proliferating difference in its own right (Derrida 1971, 41). If we follow this process with the gender binary, at first we will privilege women. To take the example of choice from Derrida’s “Women in the Beehive,” women’s studies departments will need to be founded in a context where academic pursuits related to women have been subordinated. But eventually, if we have been effective, we will need to rename them gender studies and, thereafter, something as yet unthought, outside this “gender” system entirely. Derrida suggests this work of deconstruction will eventually get us beyond women. He writes:

“There is one meaning to the word ‘woman’ which is caught in the opposition, in the couple, and to this extent you can use the force of the woman to reverse,

to undermine, this [is the] first stage of opposition. Once you have succeeded, the word ‘woman’ does not have the same meaning. Perhaps we could not even speak of ‘woman’ anymore” (2005, 146–47).

This process of getting, “perhaps,” beyond woman is precisely the deconstructive movement through which Derrida arrives at the “dream of the innumerable” and the “incalculable choreographies” of sexual and gender difference. (1982, 76) This is the deconstructive impetus to “move beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes,” even “beyond the opposition feminine/masculine” (1982, 76). It is this dream, moreover, that arguably forms the basis of deconstruction’s alliance with queer and transgender studies. As Michael O’Rourke puts it: “Queer theory has, like its pervert twin, deconstruction, been turned towards the future,” toward infinite resignifications of sexual orientation and sexual identity (2012, 29). Moreover, transgender studies, as “queer theory’s evil twin” (Stryker 2004), focuses this resignification on gender identity and expression. Beneath these two twinings, these doublings, then, lies the force of unexpected inheritance: the queer and trans promise of deconstruction.

From this vantage point, deconstruction appears consistent with some contemporary trans politics and yet, for that reason, subject to Currah’s speculative critique. Is Derrida, then, at once anachronistically ahead of his time and yet also passé because we need to move on to a transfeminist approach that admits of residual asymmetry? I think there is more to Derrida’s analysis of gender, however, and therefore more of a sympathetic resonance between Derrida and Currah’s questions about contemporary gender politics.¹ In order to demonstrate that Derrida’s critique not only fuels a movement beyond woman but also emphasizes an ongoing need to dismantle residual asymmetries, I turn now to Derrida’s theorization of “gender neutrality.”

The notion of neutralization is a focal point of “Women in the Beehive.” As mentioned above, this piece results from a 1984 seminar at Brown in which Derrida discusses the status of women’s studies in the university. While Derrida admits the potential of women’s studies to deconstruct the unspoken assumptions of the university, he nevertheless voices a concern that women’s studies risks becoming just “another cell in the university beehive” (2005, 142). To explore both possibilities, Derrida identifies two kinds of deconstruction. The first, which he terms a “positive” deconstruction, foregrounds the transformative impulse. It aims to radically change the heterosexist system by privileging the presence and concerns of women in research, pedagogy, and administration. The second, “pessimistic” deconstruction, recognizes it is impossible to liberate the university entirely from hierarchy or to escape patriarchal law. This second deconstruction, however, aims at least “not [to] be bored any longer,” and continues to effect change in women’s academic position, short

of achieving their absolute freedom (2005, 144). While emphasizing that it is ideal to make both gestures at the same time, Derrida identifies a few tactics involved in this work. One of those tactics is gender neutralization.

In order to commend gender neutralization, Derrida first has to disambiguate it from its more traditional referent. To do so, he distinguishes between two types of gender neutralization: one that reinforces the privileged gender position (i.e., man) and one that neutralizes gendered opposition but not gender difference (2005, 151). With respect to the first, Derrida acknowledges that an appeal to a neutral philosophical subject has all too easily reiterated masculine privilege across the philosophical canon and current disciplinary norms. While not a new observation by any stretch of the imagination (cf. Beauvoir 1949), it is nevertheless important. Derrida cautions against this form of gender neutralization as follows: “This is a classical ruse of man to neutralize the sexual mark. [. . .] To the extent to which universality implies neutralization, you can be sure that it’s only a hidden way of confirming the man in his power. That’s why we have to be very cautious of neutrality and neutralization, and universality as neutralization” (2005, 146).

Implicit within this universalizing form of gender neutralization is a reinscription of the masculine subject (2005, 145). As Norma Alarcón argues, when the subject of feminist theory proceeds by identifying with the neutral subject of consciousness, usually an unmarked white and masculine subject, we are all too often left in a position where “[t]he subject (and object) of knowledge is now a woman, but the inherited view of consciousness [and subjectivity] has not been questioned at all” (1991, 405). For this reason, Alarcón and others have emphasized the necessity of situating foundational texts in women of color feminism (e.g., *This Bridge Called My Back*) as theorizing multiplicity, or disrupting the very idea of a unified, singular subject.

Derrida then moves to propose a second sort of neutralization, one consistent with the project of deconstruction. This is the neutralization of gender opposition or asymmetry. He writes: “But there is *another* neutralization which can simply neutralize the sexual opposition [between “man/woman”], and not sexual difference, liberating the field of sexuality for a very different sexuality, a more multiple one. At that point, there would be more sexes . . . there would be one sex for each time” (2005, 151, emphasis added).

In contrast to a neutralization that maintains and obfuscates gender hierarchy, this deconstructive neutralization attacks the gender opposition itself. It is only through laying repeated siege to this opposition that space is constantly recreated for the proliferation of gender difference. What are we to make of Derrida’s emphasis here on neutralizing opposition? What does it mean that this neutralization preconditions the proliferation of difference (rather than vice versa)? In other words, what do we miss by moving too quickly to the dream of the innumerable differences? And what does Derrida’s concern with a residual

hierarchy—resistant to any final destruction and yet susceptible to continual deconstruction—mean for this neutralizing effort? One benefit of bringing transgender studies, and especially transfeminism, into this conversation is to sharpen these questions from a contemporary standpoint. If we understand the “opposition” here as related to the hierarchy Currah speaks of, what then is both the hope and worry of this Derridean line of thinking about gender? Has opposition indeed been neutralized? By whose measures? In which ways?

Julia Serano’s concept of trans-misogyny is particularly helpful in thinking through Derrida’s appeal to “another neutralization.” In *Whipping Girl*, Serano theorizes the concept of trans-misogyny as a way to emphasize both the generalized fear of gender differences as well as the specific forms this fear takes when directed at those trans people who embrace femininity. “When a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed,” Serano explains, “not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity, they become the victims of a specific form of discrimination: *trans-misogyny*” (2007, 14). Serano is clear that while all trans people face social stigma for transgressing cisgender assumptions, those on the trans female/feminine spectrum tend to experience more societal “fascination, consternation, and demonization” (2012). Serano deepens her analysis of trans-misogyny by distinguishing between oppositional and traditional sexism. Oppositional sexism is directed at gender-nonconformity. It takes as its premise the necessity of a clearly carved out system of oppositional gender wherein movement across and between lines must be policed. It is fueled by a belief that “opposites without crossing” is the only acceptable gender system. Traditional sexism, as the name implies, is more explicitly aimed at femaleness and femininity. If both forms of sexism intertwine to constitute trans-misogyny, then “it is not simply enough for trans activists to challenge binary gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism)—we must also challenge the idea that femininity is inferior to masculinity and that femaleness is inferior to maleness” (2007, 15). By her own account then, “trans activism must be, at its core, a feminist movement” (2007, 15). Trans politics must involve the continued fight for women’s rights. In fact, for Serano, it is only by attending to the intertwined nature of oppositional and traditional sexism that transfeminism can disrupt these deep-seated biases against both gender ambiguity and femininity.

Serano’s work helpfully extends the conversation between Derrida and transfeminism. Currah is concerned that a focus on gender pluralism has not necessarily undermined hierarchical asymmetry. If this is the case, then, in Derrida’s terms, the work of deconstruction—which undertakes the constant (if non-final) neutralization of opposition—must be renewed. For Serano, this work of unmaking the opposition, through an effective diagnosis of asymmetry, cannot be conducted simply by a return to the discourse of women’s rights. Instead, it must begin with an affirmation of transgender experience

and a grappling with the fundamental force of trans-misogyny. Asking these questions from a transfeminist perspective maintains the critique of ahistorical, universal accounts of sexual difference on a new, more deeply rooted register.

Importantly, the transfeminist critique resonates with decades of scholarship in women of color feminism.² As Susan Stryker and Talia Bettcher put it in their introduction to a special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on transfeminism:

[. . .] intersectional feminism raised the question of whether “woman” itself was a sufficient analytical category capable of accounting for the various forms of oppression that women can experience in a sexist society, which in turn opened the question of whether it was sufficient to talk about sexual “difference” in the singular, between men and women, or whether feminism called for an account of multiple “differences” of embodied personhood along many different but interrelated axes. (2016, 8)

The broad swath of scholarship on gender continues to clarify the mechanisms through which gender is chosen and resisted, assigned and colonized. The growing body of work in transgender studies, in particular, provides resources to resist the privileging of cisgender, or non-transgender, experience in theories of gender. But it also increasingly merges with (and recognizes lineages of fused concerns with) women of color and decolonial feminism, taking seriously their insights into the enmeshment of gender with race, ability, class, and other salient categories of difference. Insofar as the sex/gender distinction has been used as a tool of racial and colonial hierarchies (Spillers, Lugones, etc.), transgender studies is well positioned to explore how the enforcement of cisgender identity is tied to whiteness and colonialism, among other vectors of power.

A transfeminist approach focused on diagnosing asymmetry must then heed its own lessons. Just as the neutralization of opposition is not a one-time affair, neither will the targeted opposition remain singular. The call to proliferate differences must also attend to the proliferation of oppositions. Against a view, for example, that trans/cis is “just another binary” that must be abolished in favor of the proliferation of differences, we could instead see the work of trans politics as (at least partially) the work of diagnosing asymmetries that already exist, or places where the hierarchical valuation of gender differences is preserved—institutionally, socially, or otherwise. Both gestures are needed: the call to gender pluralism and the need to continuously diagnose hierarchy. To read a transfeminist approach that is “not gender neutral” back into Derrida, then, is to place more emphasis on the moments where he insists *on neutralizing* opposition in the service of a play of difference, always granting that this work is never finished.

Transfeminism, then, is a crucial interlocutor in the Derridean queer feminist conversation. Currah's questions arise in a contemporary landscape where trans politics have highlighted this tension between the desire for proliferation and the encounter with enforced opposition or asymmetry. While Currah's critique of gender pluralism initially seems, by extension, to be a critique of Derrida's play of differences, returning to Derrida's discussion of gender neutralization provides an unexpected resonance between deconstruction and transfeminism. Both recommend vigilance against the continual reinscription of hierarchy, whether through hetero-patriarchal law or cissexist praxis. In conclusion, transgender studies offers a rich vantage point from which to explore the risks and benefits of a focus on gender pluralism or the dance of innumerable differences.

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NOTES

1. I emphasize that Currah notes he is working through questions for a forthcoming project. His post is a call to think about current events around the bathroom bills and resulting boycotts, not a statement of position.
2. For just two examples of this work, see Combahee and Crenshaw.

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