

Resisting Definition: Gendering through Interaction and Relational Selfhood

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This paper argues that trans and genderqueer people affect the gender formation and identity of non-trans people. We explore three instances of this relationship between trans and non-trans genders: an allegiance to inadequate liberal-individualist models of selfhood; tropes through which trans people are made to stand as theoretical objects with which to think about gender broadly; and a narrow focus on gender and evasion of an intersectional understanding of gender formation.

In December 2006, a debate on trans politics raged in the feminist blogosphere.¹ Participants referred to heated discussions in the comment sections of a range of blogs as a “trainwreck,” a “wildfire,” and, more obliquely, “this episode.” The passionate anti-trans arguments offered in these blogs and comments were, in many ways, perfectly generic, though also venomous and complex. Anti-trans views and sentiments in feminist spaces arise from and reinscribe broader histories and debates than may be immediately apparent. It seems, however, that the entrance of trans and genderqueer people and their allies into active engagement with a self-identified feminist space in some way affects the non-trans women there.² In this paper, we attempt to account for one aspect of non-trans people’s fear, hatred, and worry about the existence and genders of trans people.³ We argue that because identification is always relational, gender “crossing”—shifting one’s social gender presentation, sometimes with medico-technical aid in the form of surgery and hormones—affects the gender formation and identity of people other than the trans or genderqueer person. Feminist theory can better account for both transphobia and trans resistance in light of this insight.

We see a theoretical and political trend in feminist, academic, and activist spaces: a tendency to focus on trans and genderqueer people’s identities,

whether particular or abstracted, as a generalized gender menace or, alternatively, a generalized gender salvation. This tendency troubles us for three reasons.⁴ First, the particular focus on trans and genderqueer people perpetuates an allegiance to inadequate liberal-individualist models of selfhood. We argue for seeing the specific anxieties, excitements, and desires projected onto trans identity in terms of the projector's identity: relational theories of selfhood help us understand how and why trans existence shifts the self-formation of people who do not identify as transsexual, transgender, or genderqueer.

Second, in many cases trans and genderqueer people come to bear a disproportionate weight of the theoretical, political, and personal issues involved in the gendered lives we all live. That is, although in fact we are all subject to micro- and macro-practices of gender norming, often it is trans and genderqueer people who serve as theoretical objects with which to think about gender: trans people stand in for gender relations as a whole. Through this operation real people's lives and struggles are abstracted and instrumentalized in ways that should worry us and in ways that continue to bolster individualized rather than relational models of selfhood.

Finally, rhetoric around trans identity too often deploys a narrow understanding of gender, artificially bracketing how gender is formed in and through racialized categories of age, ability, class, sexuality, nationality, and citizenship. This focus ignores the co-constitution of these experiences, serving to give primacy to dominant social identities. In the case of people writing about trans identity, we argue that proceeding with a narrow focus on gender supports the hierarchical structure of patriarchy; maintains racialized, class, able-bodied privilege; and allows white women in particular to evade the long-standing call to think holistically about gender formation. Feminists could, rather, reframe the subjective experience of gender in light of relationality, particularly in terms of how trans people not only affect but also change the meaning of gender for non-trans people.⁵

AGAINST LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

Below, we argue that the relationship presupposed in making particular, allegorized, trans people stand for a gender binary system altogether shows something important about the meaning of gender to people who are not undergoing any kind of sex or gender transition. Further, we offer an account of how focusing on defining trans and genderqueer people's gender and gender presentation evades intersectional political analysis and praxis. We begin, though, with a consideration of the theory of the self that is implicit in these twined manifestations of gender formation. Current discussions of trans lives frequently rely on liberal-individualist models of selfhood, political rights, and interests. These models are complexly at play in the history of trans struggles for

access to medical care, surgeries, and hormones—a history that must be situated in relation to the privatized, United States, psychiatric-medical insurance system and its rejection of preventive, community-health models of care. In other words, as the liberal model of individualism shapes the United States system of representative democracy, it has also shaped treatment protocols and advocacy structures along an illness-response framework.⁶

To the extent that trans people have historically been forced to speak in these terms in order to gain access to treatments, trans identity has been spoken in liberal-individualist language. It has also been profoundly medicalized in ways that are not adequate to many trans people's lived experience. Consider Sylvia Rivera's description of her own decision not to have surgeries: "I thought about having a sex change, but I decided not to. I feel comfortable being who I am . . . I will be 50 years old this coming Monday. I don't need the operation to find my identity. I have found my niche, and I'm happy and content with it. I take my hormones. I'm living the way Sylvia wants to live" (Rivera 2002, 76–77). Rivera offers an important counter-narrative to the too common presumption, particularly within anti-trans discourse, that all trans people want or need surgeries.

People have frequently framed their calls for access to surgery and hormones, and more broadly their entitlement to self-determined gender expression, as a matter of individual rights. Cressida Heyes, critiquing this model, quotes Leslie Feinberg's claims that "every person should have the right to choose between pink or blue tinted gender categories, as well as all the other hues of the palette"; and: "These ideas of what a 'real' woman or man should be straightjacket the freedom of individual self-expression" (quoted in Heyes 2003, 19). Heyes claims: "Solidarity will flounder . . . if we detach ourselves from each other and our mutual implication in favor of a demand for individual freedom. If we are all individuals making normatively equal gender choices, then where is oppression?" (Heyes 2003, 25). We attempt, here, to unpack Heyes's notion of *mutual implication* in gender formation, hopeful that this work might help in the project of proliferating solidarities and contingent freedoms.

In this section, we put forward a feminist relational model of selfhood more adequate to the complexity of trans lives, oppression, and gender formation than the liberal-individualist model Heyes critiques. We then extend this discussion to offer an account of why the existence of trans people sparks particular kinds of shifts in the self-formation of non-trans people. The terms of the debate into which we enter largely determine our use of categories of selfhood; in a real way, we see the use of individualist/liberal concepts of self as simply mistaken. In other words, we are not trying to ontologize a relational/individualist binary, in which these are foundationally separable categories, with one being preferable to the other. Rather, we see the production of self and other as simultaneous. Susan Brison has offered a persuasive feminist ac-

count of the self as foundationally relational in this way. She writes: “On this view, the self is both autonomous and socially dependent, vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of empathetic others” (Brison 2002, 38). Brison considers trauma literature in making this case, formulating her account in dialogue with narratives of trauma survivors. We take three important themes from her discussion. First, Brison highlights the connection of one’s embodiment with one’s selfhood. Brison: “The study of trauma does not lead to the conclusion that the self can be identified with the body, but it does show how the body and one’s perception of it are nonetheless essential components of the self. It also reveals the ways in which one’s ability to feel at home in the world is as much a physical as an epistemological accomplishment” (46). Second, we take the idea of self-construction as intimately a narrative activity, through which one “strings together” a remembered and ongoing narrative.⁷ This aspect of relational selfhood highlights the connection between the self-stories we are able to tell and the audience that in fact co-constitutes our storied self.⁸

Finally, Brison reframes the autonomous self—a self most usually connected to liberal philosophical accounts of individual activity (a self that “freely makes choices and wills actions”; Brison 2002, 59)—in terms of relationality. She notes that in order to “recover, a trauma survivor needs to be able to control herself, control her environment (within reasonable limits), and be reconnected with humanity. Whether the latter two achievements occur depends, to a large extent, on other people” (60). That trauma survivors need to reconstruct the interdependent frameworks through which they can move through the world with some sense of assurance shows us something about how these frameworks were and are in place in non-trauma situations. Brison thus characterizes autonomy as “fundamentally dependent on others. Not only is autonomy compatible with socialization and with caring for and being cared for by others, but the right sort of interactions with others can be seen as essential to autonomy” (61).

Many trans narratives would, we think, confirm Brison’s account of how self-formation and self-transformation is deeply relational. However, as in her account, there is an emphasis in these narratives on how others have affected the self. In other words, while some feminist accounts of relational selfhood tend to focus on the way that others are important to one’s self-formation, we would argue that it is equally important to attend to how one’s self-expression, which is always social, changes other people’s experience of themselves. Turning our gaze away from ostensibly non-normative sexes and genders allows us to see new things about normativity. The existence of trans people shifts the meaning of gender in overt and subtle ways, and not only when non-trans people interact with people they can identify as trans. It is common, that is, for non-trans people to neither know nor care about the existence of trans people.

We contend, though, that the interaction between trans and non-trans people, and the assertion in that context of the “normality” of non-trans gendering, arises from a shift in how gender is experienced and stabilized. The process of gender formation is mutually, and multiply, informed. To further explore these claims we will attend to moments of gender normalization, transphobia, and trans resistance; offer an account of how we see gender operating in these moments; and then suggest a re-reading of these moments aimed at investigating relational models of selfhood.

THEORETICAL REDUCTIONS

One manifestation of gender normalization appears in a set of core narratives about trans people, visible especially in discourse on what is variously called gender transition, sex reassignment surgery, *The Surgery*, *The Operation*, sex change, and so on. The pervasive fascination with trans and intersex people’s genitals, and the license many people take in asking trans people what their genitals look like, is an example of a common trope: for anti-trans thinkers, in synecdochic fashion, genitals stand in for the gender of a whole person, and trans people stand in for the gender binary system altogether.⁹ Pronoun use can act similarly, the chosen referent “he” or “she” marking a network of social relations that in part constitute the gendered being. When people refuse to use a trans person’s pronoun of choice, they sometimes note that they are doing so to maintain an awareness of that person’s life before transition: the pronoun is standing for and marking a social choice on both the trans person’s and the namer’s part.¹⁰

On a more general level, particular trans and intersex people are made to stand in for gender nonconforming people as a group. Often these are medicalized cases: Michel Foucault’s depiction of *Herculine* (Foucault 1980), or John Money’s and John Colapinto’s versions of *David Reimer* (Colapinto 2000). Equally, contested figures are mobilized to draw attention to the real dangers trans people face: Gwen Araujo, Erika Keels, Tyra Hunter, or the teen-we-have-come-to-know-as-Brandon Teena. Among overtly anti-trans writers, there is also a remarkably common generalization of the “fifty-year-old man in a dress,” along with the tragic figure of the teen who thinks she’s trans; both signal delusion in these literatures, though unequally, and stand in for trans people altogether. For some feminist theorists, particular transgender identities come to stand in for the possibility of radical gender shift, and for gender itself as something less fixed than we might have imagined.¹¹ Above all, we find that trans people are increasingly coming to stand in a synecdochic relation to systems of gender altogether. This operation requires several “turns”: from genitals, to social life, to social identity, to medical stabilization of that identity, to social enforcement of that identity, to theory about all of the above, to

an understanding of gender *tout court*. It is important to note that the figures of trans women and the figures of trans men are differently deployed; anti-trans writers in the lineage of Janice Raymond frequently frame trans women as an ultimate expression of men's appropriation and violation of women's bodies and spaces. In this discourse, trans men are often understood as traitors to feminism or patsies of the patriarchy.¹²

Analyses from sources as diverse as Cressida Heyes and Janice Raymond suggest that an individualist model of selfhood, in which the gender of one person is a private matter that harms no one and is of no one's concern, is inadequate to gendered experience. At the same time, refusing to recognize the self-understanding trans and genderqueer people express (as, for example, when someone identifies trans people by the pronoun they were assigned at birth rather than by the gender they live) is part of the ongoing work to naturalize gender. Refusing trans self-identifications is an activity performed for a reason. Gender isn't ever something that just "is"—it is a doing, and one way to see this is to examine how it is reinforced. The very movement of displacing "gender" through these tropological turns highlights the co-production of what is understood as "normal" and what is understood as "deviant." Deploying the figure of the transgender traitor thus simultaneously occludes actual trans and genderqueer subjectivity, reifies a normalized non-trans gender, and re-inscribes an inadequate model of self-formation. The refusal of gendered identification as a relational "doing" thus paradoxically shows us something about how trans- and non-trans genders are mutually constructed.

The figure of the individual trans woman suspected of invading "womyn's space" offers a good example of this relationality. Take the apocryphal story of a "pre-op" trans woman who is supposed to have attended the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and disrobed at the communal showers, showing her penis. Though this particular story is frequently evoked in discussions of women's safe space, we have also encountered a number of discussions in which people claim that the event never happened—that it is an urban legend. In some tellings of this story, the single trans woman becomes several trans women, who dramatically reveal themselves en masse. Consider Karla Mantilla's influential version, in an article titled "Men in Ewes' Clothing: The Stealth Politics of the Transgender Movement" first published in 2000 in the lesbian magazine *Off Our Backs*. Mantilla writes:

Look at what happened at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival last year. Apparently, pre-op mtf's entered the festival and disrobed by the showers where women were also naked preparing to shower. If these wannabe "women" had any real

understanding of what it is to be a woman in patriarchy they would have respected, not violated, women's space, and they would have understood what a horrific violation it would be for a woman to be confronted with a strange naked biological male, penis and all, when she herself is unclothed and vulnerable. (Mantilla 2000)

Mantilla's argument displays a few different reductions and substitutions. Not only is the assumed penis standing in for trans people altogether, but the collective of women in the bathroom are simplified into a single, vulnerable observer, dramatizing issues of violence and safety.¹³ Thus, there is first a reduction of trans people's collective protest to a single person's inappropriate shower behavior and second a reduction of the violence affiliated with patriarchal social relations to trans women.¹⁴ As we discuss below, trans people—especially trans women—frequently come to stand in for patriarchy altogether. Although we appreciate Mantilla's comments as an opportunity to think critically about safe space, this relationship occludes rather than illuminates broader questions of gendered safety.

Notice in this example how a (fictionalized) trans woman at Michigan is reduced to a penis, and then, through this substitution, becomes responsible for re-instantiating patriarchy as usual. In Mantilla's reading, the (fictionalized) individual performs the entirety of patriarchal social relations. We see here, against this reading, an example of how genders are complexly co-produced. So, when Mantilla (and radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys) disregard or refuse people's own gender identification, they are re-solidifying (in this case) *what it is to be a woman in patriarchy*. This re-solidification, or gender normalization, is one form of non-trans gender anxiety. There is patriarchal oppression here, but that patriarchy has less to do with privatized trans genitals than with a complex and inchoate interaction through which "women," "men," and "others" are recognized and defined.

An example that has sparked a perhaps more broadly significant set of decisions than the MWMF policy centers around the question of trans women's use of homeless or domestic-violence shelters. In Canada, discussions of whether trans women should be able to volunteer in and access shelters for women have circled around the *Kimberly Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief Society* legal decision, which allowed shelters to define who counts as "women" for the purposes of their work. In discussions of the case, Nixon is almost uniformly described as "a post-operative transsexual woman." A survivor of partner violence herself, and a former beneficiary of women's peer-support networks, in 1995 she decided to volunteer with Rape Relief. On the first night of training, as her lawyer tells it, Nixon was "expelled at the break because one of the facilitators concluded that she was a trans woman and said Rape Relief would

not accept trans women” (findlay 2006, 146). The legal battle that followed this judgment ended in February 2007 when the Canadian Supreme Court denied Nixon leave to appeal its previous decision that Rape Relief was not violating British Columbia’s Human Rights code in banning transsexual volunteers. In other words, the court protected Rape Relief’s prerogative to define what counted as a woman for them and their refusal to allow trans women to volunteer at the shelter. Shelters, like prisons, are spaces where state-mediated gender binaries are enforced. As in the Nixon case, the existence of trans people in these spaces often sparks debate about gender normativity, a debate that should itself be understood as a site for disciplining gender.

Consider this story, written by a shelter volunteer in Toronto, which begins an article on including trans peoples in shelters:

“He’s got a cock and sleeps naked in the bunk above me.” The woman before me was frightened and hesitant. “I can see his . . .” she trailed off for a moment gesturing toward her crotch, “when he climbs into bed.” The woman had been sexually assaulted, outside the shelter, by men and was feeling uncomfortable and threatened by having “a guy” in the female dorm. Her male partner, who had accompanied her into the office, was promising that he would “do something” if the shelter staff didn’t. (Vachon 2006, 227)

The shelter staff agreed to speak privately to the resident, who offered to “prove she did not have a penis.” As Wolfgang Vachon writes: “The female staff member took her into the toilets and she pulled down her pants and underwear. The woman was menstruating” (Vachon 2006, 228). Vachon offers a critical reflection on this experience, attending particularly to how the presence or absence of a penis defined sex and gender simultaneously for many people involved in the shelter system he was familiar with.

In this case, the lines of gender are enforced first by the resident, who is understood to have made a mistake based on her bunk-mate’s body shape and deep voice, then by the shelter workers on duty when the complaint is made, and finally by policy decisions set by shelter management. As we see in the Nixon case, often it is the state’s authority that underwrites and enforces gender normativity. And for this shelter resident, it is the genitally enforced gender binary that settles these questions. Menstruation here, as elsewhere, serves as the ultimate expression of womanhood, signaling the existence of the womb, the possibility of heterosexual reproduction, the failure to fulfill that promise, the presence of lack (of the phallus), and so on.

In both this case and Nixon’s, trans women are made to stand in for men’s violence. In some ways, this focus on the trans threat serves to center the dis-

cussion on how to police the boundaries of gender, rather than on the question of how to oppose gendered violence altogether. As Emi Koyama points out, and as we will discuss in detail in our next section, this policing is one way to stop thinking about class, racialization, and disability (Koyama 2006). At base, it makes gendered oppression the only thing that matters to the shelter policy, and this focus can make white women involved feel much more comfortable, and women who are “othered” through racialization, queerness, or gender variation much less at home.¹⁵ Further, policing gender boundaries obscures how in queer communities we deal (or don’t) with rape and battery: there is not, for example, as much discussion of lesbian partner battery and potential triggers of women shelter residents who have been assaulted by women as there is of hypothetical trans women assaulting other women in shelters, though it is now understood in most feminist circles that lesbian battery is a real issue (see White 2002).

Finally, reducing gender boundaries to genital configuration occludes the social work that produces genitals as significant. Since there is in fact no singular “Operation,” no such thing as “The Surgery” for the vast majority of trans people, references to “pre-op” and “post-op” trans people, particularly from non-trans commentators, can generally be understood as a way to mobilize and stabilize the framework of who counts as a “real woman” or a “real man.” Of course, these terms actively circulate within various transsexual and/or gender non-conforming spaces in ways that stabilize gendered boundaries as much as any anti-trans penis obsession. In these cases, we see a trope through which genital configuration stands in for a gendered being, that then stands in for the gender system.

We would argue, however, that this relation is much less about any particular trans person’s genital configuration than it is about the people around him, or her, or hir. When people ask questions about a trans person’s genital configuration, they by extension ground their own gender configuration. They are asking: How much like mine are your genitals? How normal am I? Women’s spaces (like MWMF or Rape Relief) that define themselves specifically as spaces for non-trans women are asserting their power to define womanhood: they are using trans women, in particular, as objects against which womanhood is determined. Instrumentalizing trans people in this way precludes thinking about gender as relational. Only when we reconsider these situations in light of Brison’s account of complicated and relational autonomy can we understand how the use of trans women and trans men as a measure to delimit womanhood shows the tension latent in gendered self-narratives. Recognizing that narratives of the gendered self are intimately tied to the gendered narratives of others, the stories of Michigan Women’s Music Festival and Rape Relief change shape, demonstrating relational gender formation.

THINKING HOLISTICALLY

Processes of naming and defining are also widely present in discussions evinced in the 2006 blog debates. Our thinking on this topic was sparked by recent critiques from trans activist-theorists, particularly around the twined erasure of race and disability in comparing abstracted trans lives to abstracted racialized and (dis)abled lives. In “Romancing the Transgender Native” Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan productively unpack the use of indigenous and non-Western gender categories to contest the gender binary system. They argue that too often the figure of the “transgender native” is used in Western trans-positive discourse to critique binary gender oppression. They write: “Despite our commitment to the value of ethnographic comparison, we are skeptical of the utility of the generic transgender native in the popular literature. Understanding of other cultures is not enhanced by broad, de-contextualized trans-cultural surveys, or by accounts that encourage readers to take cultural features out of context” (Towle and Morgan 2002, 471). They argue that, for the most part, the invocation of figures like third-gender people in some indigenous cultures of North America or India’s “hijira” erases the specificity of gendered experience in “other” cultures, and assumes that a multiplicity of gendered possibilities is inherently liberatory. These invocations erase race through proceeding as though very different racialized and ethnic contexts are reducible to gendered sameness. Viviane Namaste has noted that despite the frequent feminist affirmation of the importance of thinking race and gender together, feminist writing—particularly about transsexual women—routinely fails to do justice to that task (Namaste 2005). In a similar vein, Eli Clare recently gave a keynote address at an FTM+conference, in which he critiqued the tendency to draw analogies between “transness” and disability—particularly narratives that name transness a birth defect requiring a cure. He argues that this narrative

takes for granted that disability is an individual medical problem curable, or at least treatable, by doctors. It runs counter to the work of disability rights activists who frame disability as an issue of social justice, not of medical condition: disability lodged not in paralysis but rather in stairs without an accompanying ramp, not in depression or anxiety but rather in a whole host of stereotypes, not in dyslexia but in teaching methods unwilling to flex. It ignores the reality that many of us aren’t looking for cures but for civil rights. (Clare 2007)

Clare is one of many people arguing away from an individualist politics and working toward critical thinking about oppression and political transformation. His emphasis on the social conditions that produce disability gives us a

thicker conception of relationality, perhaps applicable to thinking about gender: gender lodged not in genitals but in social uptake and practices.

These social conditions are themselves always multiply ramified, and our gendered identities are thus intersectional to the bone. As Clare contends, when trans people use the analogy of disability to argue for particular forms of health care for trans people, gender oppression is still presented as the central, most salient oppression, even though it is a different sort of gender oppression. Perhaps we can follow Clare to think through other ways of envisioning gender within a framework that accounts for enactments of power and privilege and other forms of oppression. To understand the full complexity of identity requires a more nuanced account of how people's self-formation is multiply constituted through shifting matrices of racial formation, sexuality, (dis)ability, and class. Clare, echoing some of Brison's insights about embodiment, envisions intersectional work through a lived experience of understanding, or an understanding from lived experience:

I mean for us to embrace our myriad of bodily differences, to understand our lives as ordinary and familiar from the inside, even as we're treated as curious, exotic, unbelievable, deceptive, threatening from the outside. You only need to look around this room to see, hear, feel this myriad. I mean for us to embrace our bodily differences while never forgetting the ways in which the world privileges some bodies and marginalizes others. Bodily difference as neither good nor bad, but as a simple fact of life: gender wrapping around sexuality hanging onto race compounding class pulling at disability, all of it finally piling into our tender, resilient human bodies where the answers are ultimately not about doctors, even for those of us who transition, but about self love, community, and liberation. (Clare 2007)

Clare evokes how bodies are pulled and wrapped, how experiences must be compounded, and how understanding often hangs on the ability to think things together. This vision of bodily interaction and location foregrounds the multiple ways that gendered experience impacts and is formed by race, ability, class, and desire. Clare helps us stretch toward ways of thinking that recognize self-identity and the identification-of-others as processes of relationality.¹⁶ He calls for a conception of bodily difference in which the social world is crucially important—developing “self-love, community, liberation.” Within these processes, gender must be understood as formed in and through racialized categories of age, ability, class, sexuality, nationality, and citizenship, but also shaped through interactions with others. Evading calls to think intersectionally continues to support liberal-individualist systems and connected conceptions of selfhood and agency.

One example of these phenomena is Uppity Biscuit's "Do Not Call Me Cisgender" blog post (Uppity Biscuit 2007). In this post, part of the aforementioned online flare-up in feminist debate about trans existence, the author takes offense at the use of the term *cisgender* to refer to people who, in her words, are "not-transgender."¹⁷ Framing the debate around the question of who gets to name women, Uppity Biscuit argues that trans communities, through the use of the term *cisgender*, oppress women. She offers a clear example of a trend in feminist discourse using racial analogies as technology for gender boundary-maintenance. Ultimately, we see this definitional work precluding conversations on gender and power by establishing fixed binaries, privileging gender as the central prism of oppression, and ignoring debates on intersectionality and multiply constituted identities. Uppity Biscuit's post thus shows something about how gender transgression, marked through the use of the term *cisgender*, ultimately impacts her own gendered self-understanding.

Uppity Biscuit argues that when people (trans people and others) name non-trans people *cisgender*, they are enacting violence homologous with historical male supremacy and patriarchy. The argument proceeds through a set of declarative statements, beginning with: "Do not call me cisgender. You have no right or authority to name me without my consent." From here she argues that *cisgender* is not a name women, as a class, have taken for themselves. Couching her debate within a feminist politics of naming (and despite the fact that *cisgender* could, and does, equally apply to men), she argues that transgender people (read by her as exclusively men) are renaming women *cisgender*.

Proponents of the term *cisgender* argue that this neologism helps us recognize normative gender privilege—or, at least, that it is a useful, short term for the experience of feeling at home in one's assigned gender, even when one wants to do away with the constrained and sexist frameworks that delimit gender expression. It acknowledges that women too can hold gendered privilege, and that there might be space between cis- and trans- gender experiences. *Cisgender* itself, like *man* and *woman*, is an abstraction, and thus runs the risk of abstracting away from interlocked forms of oppression. However, *cisgender*, as a concept, can help to think about how gender is experienced and understood relationally, by pointing out the multiple ways that gender is lived. Therefore, *cisgender* women have different experiences of gender than do trans women. Those differences are inflected and changed by other axes of difference and oppression.

As shown above, through the first half of the piece Uppity Biscuit argues from her own experience of oppression. Halfway through the piece, however, her tone and focus change: she begins to speak in more general, political, and politicized terms. The turn in her argument begins with her use of race

as a metaphor for gender oppression, and this analogy is telling. Uppity Biscuit writes:

Males have been naming and defining women for a millennium and more. When you demand the right and proceed to take authority to name and define me, without my permission, you embody and keep company with male's and man's traditions. You violate me.

Historically, regarding all other human/civil rights movements, the idea was, oppressed people named THEMSELVES. They didn't re-name their oppressors. To do so would have either been laughable or dangerous, mostly dangerous. Imagine black people telling white people that from now on, white people are going to be called "(whatever)." (Uppity Biscuit 2007)

In these two phrases, and through an analogy with race, Uppity Biscuit's discursive frame shifts: racism, decades of anti-racist struggle, and racial difference are all erased. This erasure happens in two ways: first, by making affective equivalents between oppressions (racism is equated with gender oppression, here framed as being named cisgender); and second, by assuming that the racial metaphor will do certain kinds of work for the reader.¹⁸ Through these processes gender is situated as the central way of understanding oppression. For example, Biscuit's first aphorism argues that the naming by "males" of women is a central and defining moment of oppression. If this is the case, gender oppression, and specifically women's oppression, must be understood as the backbone of power and privilege. As Koyama has pointed out, framing gender oppression as central in this way ignores circumstances in which women participate in the oppression of racialized, disabled, or queer people, among others (Koyama 2006).

The tendency in self-identified radical/cultural feminist circles to equate gender and racialized oppression, as epitomized by Uppity Biscuit, relies on several simultaneous substitutions: first, all trans people must be understood as men; second, all cisgender people must be understood as women; third, women must be understood to always be defined against men; and fourth, racism must be understood as both a lens with which to understand oppression while simultaneously not applying to the situation in question. Race is, we argue, also relationally formed: processes of racialization, especially in the West, are driven by complex negotiations of history, prejudice, and science. In this regard, Uppity Biscuit's post is troubling on both race and gender as she understands both as fixed, ignoring their co-constitution. Generalizations about the experience of people of color do not attend to the ways that racism works in a given situation. Rather, they depend on a general, often affective, response on the part of the reader. Furthermore, using race as an analogy for gender disregards the

experience of racialized women, for whom race is experience rather than analogy.¹⁹

Impassioned rejections of the label *cisgender* are telling. There is a way that the fact of trans people's existence itself creates non-trans people as something new: as not transgender. We suggest that these rejections reflect not only a feminist refusal to be named by others; they also represent a response to having one's being altered because the world around one has changed. Perhaps Uppity Biscuit's refusal to be named *cisgender* is in part an allegiance to an atomistic, non-relational conception of self, relying on what few concessions the liberal-individualist system affords her by using the language of that system to protect her interests. Though at one point it may have seemed possible to appeal to a "natural" category of womanhood—and people across the spectrum did so—that category has become increasingly de-naturalized. When the racialized women of the Combahee River Collective, among many others, refused to renounce their connections to what in the sixties were called Third World movements, they called on the Women's Movement to understand how often white women were taken as the norm (Combahee River Collective 2000). Racial anxieties, racism, and failures to do justice to race in the context of feminist movements go back at least to the suffrage movement of the turn of the last century.²⁰ Though these anxieties are specifically racial, they resonate with other rejections of difference on grounds of disability, sexuality, sexual practice, and gender variance. As we have discussed above, for many the white, straight, middle-class, able-bodied norm becomes visible when it rubs up against supposedly non-normative experience. So, for non-trans women to be placed in relationship to gender non-conforming people, and perhaps trans people in particular, is to call into question what it means to be socially and self-identified as a woman. This might be true particularly if one has not experienced one's sex/gender assignment as a woman as unwelcome—even if one objects to misogynist, heterosexist femininity. Non-trans women's rage at being called *cisgender* might more properly be understood as rage at newly being *cisgender*, because they are only non-trans in relation to trans people.²¹

The radical feminist blog "I Blame the Patriarchy" was one of the central sites of the December 2006 online debate that Uppity Biscuit's post also spoke to. What began as a discussion about lipstick developed into a heated exchange about trans existence. In the comments section conversation, one contributor, maribelle, argued that trans women "dominate women b[y] co-opting our identity and insisting we recognize that they are what we are, effectively erasing our very identity and existence as women" (maribelle 2006). In this writer's view, the call to recognize trans women displaces women: maribelle understands trans women to be calling for recognition as non-trans women—such that "they [trans women] are what we [non-trans women] are." That is, she thinks trans women are attempting to be not transsexual or transgender: on this view,

they are calling for a kind of negative recognition. There is certainly a history, bolstered by the models of femininity and masculinity enshrined in the WPATH Standards of Care²² and decades of medico-technical practice in trans health care, of trans people asserting “realness” as a (usually straight) man or woman. However, as we suggested earlier, such narratives are inadequate (radically) to many trans and genderqueer people’s lives. Further, we question the supposition that gender is a zero-sum game in the way this commentator’s statement indicates, such that trans women’s existence depletes cisgender women’s existence. Rather, we see maribelle’s statement pointing toward a fraught relationality, an interdependent identity-formation.

To unpack this concept, we turn toward a seriously unlikely source: radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys’s work on trans men. She claims “FTM transsexualism is a problem for all women who want to change the power relations of male dominance rather than engage in surgical social climbing. But it is most spectacularly a problem for lesbians because it is lesbians who are suffering the agony and the expense” (Jeffreys 2002). Jeffreys argues that trans men are destroying the lesbian community through destroying first what she calls “their lesbian bodies” and second the lesbianism of their partners and communities (“FTM transsexualism destroys the lesbianism not just of the woman who “transitions” but that of her female partner too”). Jeffreys is only one of several writers who understand genderqueer and trans men as instantiating a form of masculinist “social climbing.” While trans women are framed as men stealthily infiltrating the last bastions of women’s space, Jeffreys and others describe trans men as lesbians with a particularly bad case of patriarchy-induced false consciousness. Like the commentator on “I Blame the Patriarchy,” Jeffreys outlines a kind of anti-relationality, in which substitution replaces co-constitution, in which the existence of trans people destroys the possibility of womanhood. In a way, however, Jeffreys points toward what we are framing as relational gender formation; we would agree with her that other people’s gender changes affect our own, and that such changes can be challenging. But it is a mistake to frame relational gender formation as appearing only when trans people step onto the gendered stage. Rather, the complex movement through which we unfold our selves is constitutionally in part dependent on others; it is through and with others that we are gendered, racialized, sexed, made able-bodied or disabled, classed, and so on. We therefore urgently need richer and more adequate conceptions and practices of non-individualist, relational practices of gender.

Interdependent relationality is risky. Rising to meet a world in which other people’s self-formation affects our own is something that women do disproportionately to men, and there may be an assumption that whenever this relationality is in place the patriarchy is hard at work. We are sympathetic to feminist refusals to do affective labor so that other people—usually men—can be comfortable. But socially dominant identities are multiply repositioned in

relation to other people's struggles for personhood, dignity, and recognition; a "normal" person might suddenly be forced to understand himself as a man, able-bodied, straight, white, part of a settler state, and more. In order to respond to the call to recognize trans people as subject to gendered violence, for example, people involved in women's shelters might have to confront the assumptions they make about who counts as a potential shelter resident—and these assumptions are as much about racialization, class, perceived "sanity," sex work, HIV status, and sexuality as they are about sex and gender. In so doing, they are confronting questions similar to Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?": who "counts" as part of a movement for liberation from gender oppression?

Answering this question brings us back to Heyes's call for recognition of mutual implication that does not rely on a demand for individual freedom. We understand self-identification to be at root a kind of relationality. This relationality is constantly in process; it begins with what a person chooses, but that choice itself is never separate from the multiple, intersecting networks that constitute self-formation. While labeling and being identified by others is for the most part a judgment that takes place in a particular moment, a slice of time, self-identification is essentially a work-in-progress, a narrative that in its telling constitutes a self. This is why a woman can identify as a lesbian even if her partner has transitioned and now lives as a man; she might not be labeled a lesbian in the context of a particular slice of time, but her own narrative identification stabilizes and creates that self-identification. Personal identity, in this sense, is always also about the communities and networks of relation that a person participates in and that make her up; it is constituted through histories, affiliations, political work, and love: it is never only personal. Identity and identification is therefore a sticky process—our imagined character's lesbian identity might be called into question as a disjuncture widens between her self-identification and how she is labeled.

In this regard, gender normalization is a form of gender oppression. The heated debate in the feminist blogosphere, and the continued attack on trans people by self-identified feminists, is important. As we have argued, conceptions of trans identity and gender transformation are freighted with complex presuppositions and implications. Too often, individual trans people, particularly trans women, stand in for trans people in general and the gender system altogether. While focusing on one person can do important political and philosophical work, it is only really effective when individuals are understood as a way to see the intersecting worlds that make them up. This would be a non-individualist way of looking at individuals: taking them as an optic by which to understand a world. Similarly, focusing on transgender issues as only about gender hypostatizes gendered being and abstracts away all the complex interactions that are in fact at play in gender formation—racial formation, class,

sexuality, ability and disability, and more. Finally, unpacking relationality leads us to a greater understanding of how interactive gender actually is. The implications for this are broad, and perhaps lead us to better recognize the ways that gender and gendering are relational processes.

NOTES

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1. "Blogsphere" here refers to the interconnected online personal and collective opinion pieces called "blogs," short for "web logs."

2. Throughout this paper we use "trans" as shorthand for transsexual and transgender people. We recognize that people experience these identities very differently and in no way mean to collapse the differences between transsexual/transsexual experience and transgender. In some cases we note the specificity of the experience, but in general we judge the anxieties produced in non-trans people to be similar and to allow for our more generalized use.

3. Relationships between trans/genderqueer and non-trans people's gender formations and identities are also manifest in non-trans desire for trans and genderqueer people, though we do not explore this concept fully in this paper. However, non-trans people's desire for trans or genderqueer people may be another instance of the impact of relational gender formation.

4. We are more troubled by those trends that demonize trans and genderqueer people because of the different kinds of harms that accrue to each, though we recognize these same patterns at work in both positive and negative reactions to trans and genderqueer people.

5. Thanks to Ada Jaarsma for this formulation.

6. In this regard, "wanting to know someone's diagnosis" connects to a rich discourse on disability and is itself based in a individual-liberal model; as Eli Clare argues, the current medical establishment privileges self-knowing, expertise, and agency that defer to medical knowing, expertise, and agency (Clare 2007). We don't have the space here to consider how U.S. medical models are connected to a global political economy of healthcare. So, for example, surgeries that may be unavailable to uninsured trans people in the United States because of cost or other restrictions are sometimes "made available" elsewhere in part because of a complex array of colonial histories, current trade regimes, and mobility afforded by the global class differentials of the over-developed world.

7. As Brison writes: "In order to construct self-narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them" (Brison 2002, 51).

8. It may be possible to deepen Brison's account through a consideration of coming-out narratives. In an unpublished paper, Nick Mitchell and Maria Meza have persuasively argued that in many queer spaces this relationship is consistently evoked and reworked in the fictionalized coming-out process, whereby a queer identity is often considered valid only if it is widely acknowledged. They challenge this theory, specifically in thinking about black men who have sex with men on the down low (DL), arguing that when people frame men on the DL as refusing responsible, adequate gay politics they re-instantiate normative ideas of gender, family, and community while simultaneously relying on cultural constructions of whiteness to fulfill the kinds of self-realization that is called into being by "coming out" (Meza and Mitchell 2007).

9. "Synecdoche," for readers unfamiliar with literary theory, names a figure of speech in which, usually, a part of some thing is used to name the whole of that thing. A common example: "the hired hands are picking strawberries." In this case, "hands" (a part of a person's body) stands for the whole of that person's being (their body, their work, their intentionality). There are also cases in which synecdoche names particular kinds standing for more general kinds (if someone says, "can you spot me a Tampax?" she would not be disappointed if you passed her some other brand of menstrual "sanitation" product), or in which a general term is used to refer to a specific instantiation (as in: "I called the police [a totality], but they [specific law enforcement officers] haven't shown up yet").

10. For example, Sheila Jeffreys notes: "I identify FTMs and MTFs by the pronouns that demonstrate their sex class of origin for the sake of clarity" (Jeffreys 2002). Dean Spade explains, conversely, his own pronoun use: "The word 'he' wasn't chosen because it means something true to me, or feels all homey and delicious. No pronoun feels personal. I've chosen it because the act of saying 'he', of looking at the body I'm in and the way that my gender has been identified since birth, disrupts oppressive processes that fix gender as real, immutable, and determinative of one's station in life" (Spade 2004).

11. Judith Butler, Judith/Jack Halberstam, Kate Bornstein, and Riki Ann Wilchins are the most commonly cited examples of this tendency, often identified as broadly post-structuralist.

12. See Julia Serano's recent work on trans-misogyny and what she calls the "scapegoating of femininity": "When a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness of femininity, they become the victims of a specific form of discrimination: *trans-misogyny*" (Serano 2007, 14–15).

13. Thanks to Laurie Shrage for helping us clarify this point.

14. A public statement issued by MWMF organizers in 2006 offers another example where the women in question are framed more specifically as a single person: "In 1999, Camp Trans protesters caused extensive disruption of the festival, in which a male from Camp Trans publicly displayed male genitals in a common shower area and widespread disrespect of women's space was voiced" (Vogel 2006). In this case, a trans woman who may never have existed, and who has in any case been fictionalized, is simultaneously reduced to her possible penis and made to stand in for "Camp Trans protesters" and, indeed, for trans people as a whole. As when the worker's complex life

and intention is reduced to her hands, this display of “male genitals in a common shower area” comes to stand in for trans people in general, and, further, for the “widespread disrespect of women’s space” that we might more usually associate with heteronormative white-supremacist patriarchy.

15. As barbara findlay argues: “The difference between oppression and internalized oppression, on the one hand, and internalized dominance on the other is this: oppression and internalized oppression hurt like hell; internalized dominance generally feels good. It feels normal” (findlay 2006, 149).

16. Self-identifying is understood here as a flexible process of self-understanding; labeling is understood here as a process other people use to categorize and make sense of others.

17. *Cisgender* is a neologism, circulating primarily on the Internet, used as another term for non-trans people. It seems to have been appropriated from molecular biology, where *cis-* is defined as, for example: “Characterized by having certain atoms or groups of atoms on the same side of the longitudinal axis of a double bond or of the plane of a ring in a molecule” (<http://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/ghr/glossary/cisconfiguration> [accessed January 30, 2009]).

18. Also consider the MWMF’s press release argument that “Supporting womyn-born womyn space is no more inherently transphobic than supporting womyn of color space is racist” (Vogel 2006). Vogel’s argument assumes parallels between transphobia and racism and equates the systems of racialization and gendering. As many commentators have noted, it is also inconsistent with the festival’s practice of providing a women-of-color-only space within the festival. Were these categories understood as really parallel, perhaps MWMF would set up a womyn-born-womyn-only space within the festival as a whole. Articulating racism and sexism as parallel systems of oppression limits how well we can think about multiply constituted subjectivity: parallel lines famously do not intersect.

19. Other bloggers, such as Brownfemipower (quoted below), responded with more multivalent analysis to the anti-trans rhetoric posted on self-described radical-feminist posts and blogs such as “Do not Call me Cisgender” and “I Blame the Patriarchy.” Brownfemipower posted these reflections on her site in response to anti-trans comments on other sites: “So I think from there, the question becomes, are we going to fight them [anti-trans feminists] to get our foot in the door? Or are we going to acknowle[d]ge that gender does not trump any identity—that there are multiple ways that each of us are violated, mu[l]tiple reasons—and our job as feminists is to constantly shift that center—to embrace the shady bound[a]ries and unidentifiable centers—because with each shift, with each recentring of a new identity, we are able to find new strands of violence that we can then name and begin to find new ways to address and account for. In other words, allow the bound[a]ries to be messy enough where each group of people can cross into the other groups['] “space” while at the same time, maintain their own space. Intersecting circles, I guess would be the best ill[u]stration of what I am trying to say” (Brownfemipower 2007).

The “intersecting circles” Brownfemipower encourages us to recognize illustrate the many ways that oppression works. We particularly appreciate the work

Brownfemipower does to think about messy and mutable boundaries, which shift over time and in response to struggle.

20. See Angela Davis's germinal work on racism in the suffragette movement (Davis 1983).

21. Koyama deepens this suggestion, arguing that the "very existence of transsexual people, whether or not they are politically inclined, is highly threatening in a world that essentializes, polarizes, and dichotomizes genders, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and lesbian-feminism are not immune from it" (Koyama 2006, 704).

22. Formerly the Benjamin Standards, authored by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBI-GDA), these standards of care offer medical personnel means to assess trans people who seek various forms of health services. This assessment often includes a "Real life Test" or "Real Life Experience" (Benjamin 2001).

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