

All My Friends Are Trans (or Will Be Soon)

MARQUIS BEY

Abstract This essay makes the case that the author's friends, all of them, are or are becoming trans. Not in a way that indexes a medico-juridical demographic, but in the sense that trans as a mode of living is the grounds on which the author forges relationality. Thus it is no surprise that time and again, friends the author has long had keep consistently shifting their identifications, moving more radically in unrelation to gender, becoming, in a word, trans.

Keywords trans, friends, Gilles Deleuze, abolition

If you ask some folks of a certain generation, or some folks of a certain political leaning, or even some folks who are otherwise fine people and just don't "get it," you'll hear pangs of *All this gender stuff has just gone too far*. Or *Apparently, you can just say you're a woman and now I'm the bad guy if I don't think of you that way*. You might even hear inflections of the aforementioned within the very field for which this journal is a commemoration, something to the effect of "Nowadays, all you have to do is say you're trans and, *viola!*, you're trans. And if anyone can be trans, what's the point?" Or something like that. And I'm here loving every second of the things to which these are all responding.

Though I am one who often, much to others' frustration, immediately takes the route of the philosophical, I'll suspend such theoretical maneuvers for a brief moment. Instead, I begin with the interpersonal, the experiential, not to venerate these things or imply their hierarchized fundamentality relative to the philosophical but to assuage my potential detractors—indeed, I am also one who, departing from many of my comrades, wishes to *de-emphasize* the experiential and material, as *my* understanding of trans quite deeply exceeds and vitiates the grounds on which the material and experiential, and the implicit transparency of both, rest. Believe it or not, there are quite a few who do not wish for *this* kind of trans to resonate. But that is, to me, the future of trans—and, too, its present, its past.

Only two days ago, at the time of writing, I texted a friend, with whom I share a mutual friend, who used, for the first time in my presence, “they” pronouns for said mutual friend. A year ago, at the time of writing, a dear comrade shared with me their understanding, now, of herself as agender, so he will be using all of the “Big 3” pronouns: *he*, *she*, and *they*. Two years ago to date, my dearest and longest-standing loved one shared with me that they, too, understand themselves through nonbinariness as a practice and project of gender vitiation. Indeed, we do not identify as nonbinary, we do not respond, when asked the question of identification, with “I am nonbinary”; rather—and perhaps this inflects my desire for the future of the trans in trans studies—we are given to an understanding of ourselves through nonbinariness precisely because the nonbinary, the trans, is not something owned and worn on our corporealities but in fact a modality of tweaking and undermining and severing gender, a way to disregard and disrespect gender *itself* as an impositional apparatus. Or, two and a half years ago, I had my Zoom name, as I do now, as “Marquis: they|them, or any pronouns,” which the colleague on the other end responded, “Oh you use they pronouns now too? Me too; I guess a lot has changed since we saw each other last [three years prior].” And finally, one of my closest intellectual kinfolk, as I read a draft of an essay he was writing, wrote, “As someone who is read as and understands himself as white,” to which I commented, on the “himself,” *for now*.

All of my friends, it seems, are and are becoming, or will soon become, trans.

Let us, as we must, clarify: this is not to siphon meaning and importance, not to mention resources, from those who would, I think troublingly, be deemed “actual trans people,” as soooo many reference, a discursive referentiality I suppose I “get” but have much to say about.¹ The aim here is not to take anything away from those trans folks who have, we might say, undergone more typical, traditional, or expected channels—hormonal, medical, psychological, interpersonal interventions and alterations; certain corporeal expressions or presentations; certain experiences, often violent; and so forth. It often perplexes me, in fact, when the *expansion* of trans is read as a *taking from* those who are said to rightly lay claim to it. Because in substantive part, trans indexes expansion, a nonproprietary view over who can validly uptake (or refuse) gender in certain ways. But further, for the purposes of how this meditation sees the future of trans studies, trans can be said to index what I have for the longest time been saying, in boisterously radical conversation with so many comrades and kinfolk and accomplices: “the critique of the regulative regime of normative gender and categorization,” “the vitiation of imposed racial and gender ontologies” (Bey 2022: 3).

Now the suspension is lifted and we mosey into the philosophical. I will go on record in print, as I have gone on record verbally with a kindred trans philosophical spirit (still swooning from that conversation we had, E), that my two

favorite philosophical loves—Derrida and Deleuze—were trans feminist thinkers. Like, seriously. And so, I was zero percent surprised when I read a conversation in *Transgender Marxism* (Gleeson and O'Rourke 2021), a text we should all read (and I say that as someone who is not a Marxist, Black, trans, or otherwise), that elucidated the radical trans inflections of Deleuze. CB and An, the authors, engage in a dialogue on Deleuze and gender difference and subtitle their exchange, marvelously, as “The Conspiratorial Association for the Advancement of Cultural Degeneration.” They offer transness, not *in* Deleuzian terms per se but as emergent from a sitting-with Deleuze—or rather, with the thoughts offered us by Deleuze—and wish to “[take] it beyond mere liberal identity” (200). As we should take all things. It is the “mere liberal identity” that is being thrust as a response when one, like I did, spouts a more insurrectionary and nonproprietary transness and is, like I was, responded to with, “But my transness is mine, and *only* for those who are actually trans people.” The response of trans as specific identity, one that has its place and fits within the extant categorizations of capitalistic quantifiability—which is to say surveilability and disciplinary ease—has the effect and intent of “reterritorialis[ing] this line of flight,” a line of flight that the trans is meant to embolden and (un)define (201). If it is true, and I am inclined to think it is, that the trans feminist insurrection happens and continues to happen when we get “out of the offices of gender,” *period*; when we realize that “Being just women,” trans or cis or otherwise, “isn’t enough anymore”; when we “dynamite the sex and gender binominal as a political practice” (WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network 2010)—if this is true, then trans-as-my-specific-medico-juridical-identity-that-must-be-respected-because-we-ought-to-be-good-liberal-human-(rights-fetishist)-beings is far from what trans can and must be.

It is not so much that trans reconfigures gender in “better,” more “inclusive” ways so much as it is that trans, to return to that manifesto by the WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network, *does not wish to do gender*. “Everyone produces gender,” they write. But the insurrection to which we are committed yearns for so much more. Where everyone else produces gender, “we produce freedom” (WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network 2010). Because gender itself is the culprit; the ways our racialized and gendered identities are put onto us is no mere descriptive sign; it is, CB and An go on, “the actual breaking and binding of the body,” fundamental to which is “sexuation itself” (201). Gender is offered, or more accurately forced upon, as a way of “massacring the body as soon as it’s born,” indeed *before* it is born. And such massacring—such gender; gender as such—is vital for the production of a productive labour force or the productive body. Vital for capitalism” (202). And people wonder why I bear an abolitionist relationship to gender.

That is what the future of trans and trans studies looks and feels like for me. And what it has long been. I’m not here to grow ever more focused on valid

criteria for entry into the exclusive club of transness, where only those who measure up can enter. Open it, more and more. Let everyone in; or know that no one is out. Not because there are no standards or no consequences for differences of subjectivity (in this iteration of the world). But because trans is that desire and politicized enactment of and for the radical interrogation of standards and differences themselves.

Marquis Bey is professor of Black studies, English, and gender and sexuality studies at Northwestern University. Their work focuses on trans and nonbinary studies, Black feminist theory, and abolition. They are the author, most recently, of *Black Trans Feminism* and *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*, both published in 2022.

Note

1. And I ask, as has become the refrain of my brilliant student, Mustafa, “Who are the real trans people?” How can one even comfortably begin to answer this question, yet repeat ad nauseam its grounding assumption: that there *are* “real” trans people, and thus “fake” trans people, and we clearly know the difference? Especially when we are, or ought to be, committed to a radical trans politics that undermines the very logics of authenticity embedded in “realness” to begin with.

References

- Bey, Marquis. 2022. *Black Trans Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gleeson, Jules Joanne, and Elle O'Rourke, eds. 2021. *Transgender Marxism*. London: Pluto.
- The WhoreDykeBlackTransFeminist Network. 2010. “Manifesto for the Trans-Feminist Insurrection.” Anarcha Library, October 20. <http://anarchalibrary.blogspot.com/2010/10/manifesto-for-trans-feminist.html>.