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“Gender (As Constant) Labor”: A Consciousness Raising Dialogue on Transfeminist Scholarship and Organizing

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“Gender (As Constant) Labor”: A Consciousness Raising Dialogue on Transfeminist Scholarship and Organizing

Abstract

This co-authored essay draws on student research conducted for an upper-level course called Trans*Studies that was originally presented at the Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference in October 2016. Drawing on Jane Ward's generative concept of "gender labor", our Dialogue highlights the material effects of representational politics, and articulates the need to centre a transfeminist critique of normative regimes of power, including the representation of "women's" history in the United States.

Keywords

transfeminism, gender labor, materiality, representation

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to our classmates in LGBT 302 for making our Dialogue possible - Gwen Major-Williams, Yvonne Brieger, Raphaela Kramer, and Gemyra Greggs, and to the participants who attended our intervention. Bios: At the time of writing, Maddy Devereaux was a senior at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. She graduated in 2017 with a Biology major and a Public Policy Health Care concentration minor. She is currently attending nursing school. Jason Kwong is a Posse Los Angeles Scholar and senior ('18) at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He is a Media and Society Major with a double minor in LGBT Studies and Entrepreneurial Studies, and is interested in the intersection between queer politics, social media, the internet, and pop culture. At the time of writing, Clare McCormick, originally from Staten Island, New York, was a senior at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. She graduated in 2017 with a double major in Theatre and English, with concentrations in Theatre History and creative writing, respectively. She also holds a minor in LGBT Studies, and looks forward to a career dedicated to the promotion of queer theatre. Judith Schreier studies German as a Foreign Language and American Studies at the University of Leipzig, Germany. She spent one semester abroad at the University of Stockholm in Sweden and one at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York to bridge her two majors. At the time of writing, Vincent Creer was a senior at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He graduated in 2017 with a double major in Public Policy and LGBT Studies. Vincent enjoys studying the intersection of gender labor, knowledge production, and queer of color critiques. After graduating, Vincent plans on working as an advocate for LGBT-friendly policies, prison abolition, and equitable representations of people of color in the media. Melissa Autumn White is Assistant Professor of LGBT Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where she teaches Trans* Studies, Queer Theory, Sexuality and Space, Histories of Sexuality in the West, and the Introductory course. Her research focuses on queer migration and refugee sponsorship and resettlement. Her first book, *Mobile Desires: The Politics and Erotics of Mobility Justice*, was published with Palgrave Pivot in the fall of 2015.

“GENDER (AS CONSTANT) LABOR”:
A CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING DIALOGUE ON
TRANSFEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP AND
ORGANIZING

MELISSA AUTUMN WHITE, WITH
MADDY DEVEREAUX, JASON KWONG,
CLARE MCCORMICK, JUDITH SCHREIR,
& VINCENT CREER
HOBART AND WILLIAM SMITH COLLEGES



INTRODUCTION

On a rainy October Friday in 2016, I accompanied a group of undergraduate students from Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York to nearby Seneca Falls to join the biennial Dialogues conference, “Lean Out: Gender, Economics, and Enterprise.” We were excited to take the work we had been doing the previous Spring in an upper-division course called “Trans* Studies”¹ outside the walls of the classroom, and we felt that joining the Dialogues would provide us with an ideal opportunity to think with students, faculty and activists about gender *itself* as a form of constant labor through a distinctively *transfeminist* lens. Our aim was two-fold: first, to meet with others working on similar questions in university and activist contexts, and second, to bring a multi-vocal discussion around transfeminism to Seneca Falls, the site of the Declaration of Sentiments

¹ We use trans* in this paper to signify the broadest rubric for both gender non-conforming people (who may or may not self-identify as “trans”) *and* gender “passing” cis-normative people who have had a history of discontinuity between their embodied existence and the sex/gender to which they were assigned at birth.

in 1848. We felt it was important both to honor the fraught history of feminist movements that have made contemporary work in the field of Gender, Women's and Sexuality Studies possible, and we also thought it was crucial to provide a transfeminist perspective on gender labor in a historic site so strongly associated with "first-wave" feminism. After all, students were well aware of the vicious and ideological rejection of trans lives and embodiments by *some* lesbian and radical feminists in the late 1970s, and we felt compelled to intervene in the generational constructs (or "wave" models of feminism) that continue to position trans and queer feminist work as a representational diversion from the more central questions of material feminism.

Ours was one of the opening sessions, and, relatively speaking, poorly attended. We had approximately as many "audience" participants as contributors to the Dialogue, and we had a tremendously difficult time hearing ourselves think as, ironically enough, on the other side of a curtain partitioning the gymnasium space we were in, a much larger concurrent Dialogue was engaged in a recitation of the Declaration of Sentiments. The ongoing tensions and contestations within the history of feminist thought and in contemporary feminist activism could not have been more viscerally felt by all those who participated in our Dialogue on transfeminism and gender labor. We had hoped to move the fertile discussions that emerged through our Spring seminar beyond the walls of the classroom to engage with the many students, activists and faculty that had gathered at this historic site of the women's movement in the United States. Further, we had hoped to consider what it might mean—and what it might entail—to find the common ground shared by contemporary queer, trans, and feminist activists around questions of subjectivity and identity formation in relation to political, economic, and cultural struggles that affect the material realities of people's everyday lives. And we found our voices almost drowned out by the Declaration of Sentiments.

This paper then aims to keep open the space that our Dialogue intended to create, and provides an archive of the students' "consciousness raising" dialogue on transfeminist scholarship and

organizing on that rainy October day. The paper opens with a discussion of the seminar course, “Trans*Studies,” in which these conversations first began, and then provides a transcript of the students’ presentations. In conclusion, we invite continued dialogue around the points of continuity and contestation among various strands of feminist thought and activism.

TRANSFEMINISM & TRANS* STUDIES 302

Despite the importance of transfeminist epistemologies for cutting edge published scholarship in the field of Gender, Women’s and Sexuality Studies, there remains much to be done within undergraduate programs and departments themselves to introduce students to this rich body of thought and engaged activism. With this in mind, the starting place of our contribution to the Seneca Falls Dialogues conference of 2016 was a 300-level course entitled “Trans*Studies,” an advanced seminar developed and taught by the author in the LGBT Studies program at Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) in the Spring of 2016.² Working against mainstream, often celebratory, and ahistorical representations of famous – and glamorous – trans people (e.g. Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner), the course provided students with a partial genealogy of what could be described as a distinctively transfeminist approach to knowledge production and activism. “Transfeminism,” a term coined by Emi Koyama in 2001, centers the experiences of multiply-marginalized trans women “who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (Koyama 2001). A transfeminist approach, put most broadly, begins from the vantage point of those whose lives are intersectionally minoritized by ruling regimes of power, including heteronormativity, gender normativity, colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and systematic economic disenfranchisement.

² LGBT Studies began as LGB Studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in 2002, and is largely acknowledged as the first stand-alone program in the country. LGBT Studies is now celebrating its 15th year at HWS as a program distinct from the Women’s Studies program, which has a 45-history at Hobart and William Smith.

Despite the current cultural fascination with transgendered embodiment and experience in the United States, the story of how we arrived at this moment remains largely submerged. What histories, relationships and struggles have rendered this current moment possible? If, as the June 2014 issue of *Time* magazine suggested, the rising visibility of trans struggles in the US mark a “new civil rights frontier”, then how did we get here? Further, what remains to be done?

To begin to answer these questions, students in LGBT 302: Trans* Studies at HWS were offered the opportunity to trace a partial genealogy of the emergence of transfeminist thought and intervention. We began with the debates over “authentic womanhood” and the “real” subject of feminism between radical lesbian feminists Janice Raymond (1979) and Sheila Jeffreys (2014),³ and trans scholars Sandy Stone (1987), Susan Stryker (1994), and Emi Koyama (2006). Alongside these texts, and over the first four weeks of the course, students read Leslie Feinberg’s groundbreaking novel, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), which functions not only as a profoundly affective archive of what Feinberg describes living as a “he-she” in the pre-Stonewall 1950s and 60s, but also provides a rich history of post-war working class gendered and raced relations in the borderlands (geographically) of Buffalo, New York. These texts, introduced in the first few weeks of the course, led us into a discussion of the “FTM/Butch” border wars (Halberstam 1998, Hale 1998) published in critical response to the cultural appropriations, within the LGBTQ community, of the 1993 murder of Brandon Teena, spectacularized by the 1998 Hollywood film *Boys Don’t Cry* (dir. Kimberley Pierce). With this genealogical backdrop as partial scaffolding in place, students went on to read debates marking the emergence of the scholarly field now known as “Trans Studies,” (Stryker et al. 2008; Enke, 2012), and then moved into an examination of a series of case studies of contemporary transfeminist activist work, including: indigeneity/2-

³ An excerpt from Sheila Jeffrey’s 2014 book opened our first week of the course alongside Janice Raymond’s infamous 1979 piece to demonstrate to students that these debates are not over, or “old” news to be relegated to the dustbin of the history of feminist thought.

Spirit/settler colonialism; sex work; shelters; and prison abolition. In the final stages of the class, students were invited to critically consider the instantiation of “Trans Studies” as the most recent interdisciplinary field of institutionalized difference-based knowledge production within the academy, whilst pursuing independent research projects drawing on the critical modes developed through the course literature.

Following the conclusion of the course in Spring of 2016, a number of the students abridged their final projects into a multi-vocal, consciousness-raising intervention staged at the Seneca Falls Dialogues. Trans*Studies provided an intellectual space within which we agreed to read texts in common as a means of collectively *building* a dynamic and respectful learning community that students were invited to recognize as an *achievement* rather than a given, not least because each student came into the course with a distinct history of academic training, activist engagement, and working knowledge of issues affecting gender and sexual minorities. Rather than taking the resulting unevenness of the students’ creative work as “problematic” or something to be “corrected,” then, we decided to embrace the differences in our learning trajectories, writing styles, and approaches to engaging with transfeminist scholarship as a multi-vocal strength, one that would allow us to, we hoped, spark spirited Dialogue with participants who we imagined would also be at different starting places in terms of transfeminist scholarship and activism, both intellectually and politically. An archive of our dialogue follows below.

AN ARCHIVE OF OUR DIALOGUE: “GENDER LABOR: NEW DIRECTIONS IN TRANS*FEMINIST THOUGHT”

This section of the paper provides an archive of the otherwise ephemeral Dialogue that we contributed to the Seneca Falls conference of 2016, “Lean Out: Gender, Economics, and Enterprise.” The red-thread running throughout each undergraduate student author’s intervention is the concept of “gender labor” (Ward 2010), or the *performative work* (Butler 1990) that gendered embodiment carries out in both the representational and material world. Building from each student’s

independently conceived research projects—which variously explored the representation of trans people in mainstream and social media (reality TV, talk shows, the Academy Awards, and Reddit.com); the ideological and material roles of trans* and queer subjects in struggles for racial justice, access to education, and pedagogy—the various strands of the Dialogue that follows take *gender itself* as a form of *constant laboring* that simultaneously conforms to and disrupts normative regimes of power, demonstrating the interconnections between materiality and signification practices. Readers will note that the various provocations that motivated our overarching Dialogue (below) reflect the learning trajectories (both intellectual and political) of the student authors; the uniqueness of each author’s voice has been maintained as distinct to highlight the challenges and possibilities of collaborative learning across institutional, embodied, and lived differences.

Gender Labor: What does it take to pass?

Maddy Devereaux

Embodiment can be defined as a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality, or feeling deeply related to subjectivity, or sense of self. Within certain constraints, an individual has the ability to embody any specific ideas, qualities, or feelings while constructing themselves as an intelligible subject vis-a-vis the social. Thus, the way that an individual constructs their body can reveal very much about the way that they would like to be identified. Of course the labor of constructing oneself as an intelligible subject is always informed by systems of power that align themselves along the axes of race, class, sexuality and gender comportment.

Often, an individual will present a certain embodiment for the purpose of how others will perceive them. There are a variety of factors that can motivate an individual to achieve a specific embodiment. This can be as simple as driving a fancy car and wearing expensive jewelry to make a statement of class, or as complex as the trans body that embodies a certain gender identity to “pass” in the eye of the public. Passing is the idea of an individual having the ability to identify with a certain group (for example, along the lines of race, class, and gender identification) but

also has the ability to identify with another group. In the case of the trans body, an individual may have been assigned female at birth, but later in life the individual may “choose” to identify as male. This individual may have presented themselves as female to the eye of the public (or been “read” that way), but later in life the individual may attempt to present themselves as male in the eye of the public. If the individual can construct their embodiment and present themselves to the eye of the public the way that they would like to be identified, then the individual has successfully passed.

Constructing an embodiment to identify as a certain gender does not come without gender labor. I define gender labor as the act of playing the role, and following the rules that correspond with gender norms in society’s heteronormative binary system. Essentially, gender labor entails the constant labor of portraying masculinity or femininity in an intelligible way. Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed in a way that allows them to be portrayed through certain performances and appearances that correspond to the gender binary system. In their simplest form, and in relation to heteronormative expectations, masculinity is portrayed through dominance, aggression, and strength, while femininity is portrayed through elegance and beauty. Taking Jane Ward’s concept of “gender labor” in my own direction, I would argue that gender labor can be the subconscious act of the assigned male driving the car instead of the assigned female, or the assigned female preparing dinner instead of the assigned male. In our patriarchal society, the traits of masculinity are much broader and bolder than the refined and detailed traits of femininity.

In the case of the trans body, gender labor is used to achieve a recognizable (within the heteronormative two-sex/gender system) form of embodiment. For example, a trans woman’s ability to pass is confined by the extent to which she embodies femininity “successfully.” The trans woman is the epitome of the extent of gender labor that it can take to pass. You can argue that it is harder to transition from a male to a female than it is to transition from a female to a male. While the female to male is likely to pass with just hormonal treatments, the male to

female must take more extreme measures to successfully pass because of the way that masculinity signifies. For example, a female to male can wear clothes to embody the physical figure of a male, whereas it is more difficult for the male to female trans person to embody the pear-shaped figure that signifies “female.” Moreover, it is much easier for the female to male to cut hair than it is for the male to female to grow hair. Not only is it harder for the male to female to successfully pass, it is also harder for the male to female to obtain access to gender confirmation surgery. Gender confirmation surgeries are not accessible for many trans individuals because of the cost along with other constraints, but for the male to female trans person, there is a more extensive list of requirements than that of the female to male trans person.

What are the consequences of embodying a certain identity? What does it take to pass and what is the purpose of passing? For some trans individuals, passing is a way to survive. Passing another day is the equivalent of surviving another day. Failing to pass could result in discrimination, oppression and even violence. This is when the stakes of passing begin to rise and the gender dysphoria can become dangerous. Embodiment becomes unconditional to prevent the failure to pass. But when embodiment becomes unconditional, how far will the trans body go to achieve a desired identity? Is it worth constructing oneself to the extent of becoming objectified in order to fulfill the requirements of a heteronormative society?

Trans Media Representation*

Jason Kwong

The Puritanical history of the United States seems to be long gone with the days of witch burnings and scarlet letters, but remnants of this religious past still linger in the ways we conceptualize the binary gender system in our current cultural climate in the US, the ways we derive entertainment from shaming the sinner, and transphobic thought and rhetoric in reality television in the early 21st century. Jill Jones (2009) succinctly summarizes this idea in her article “Hags and Whores: American Sin and Shaming from Salem to Springer,” when she writes,

In order to lead a truly pious life, one needed to seek out sin in

one's self and in others. The job of leaders, of parents, of husbands, of churchgoers, was to find the inevitable faults in the people of the community or household, and correct them. Scrutiny was the first step toward control, and was the absolute duty of every Puritan (Jones, 2009: 148).

As she continues:

In the end, Americans still disapprove of sin, but they love the spectacle of it. Perhaps the popularity of *The Jerry Springer Show* derives directly from the sinners' lack of remorse. It gives us the freedom to enjoy their punishment without guilt (Jones, 2009: 153).

Arguably, the focus of people's scrutiny has shifted from the supernatural being of the witch or the everyday sinner to the seemingly "unnatural" body of the transgender or gender non-conforming individual. By pointing out these perceived flaws and sins in others, viewers are participating in a shaming ritual that dates back centuries as a way to be entertained and to fortify their own position as a "correct subject."

Shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Maury* created, beginning in 1991, a media platform where the audience is invited to judge, condemn, and scrutinize the individuals who appeared on these reality shows and who were often times trans* or gender nonconforming, all while in the safety of their own homes. Some official episode titles of *Springer* include "Transexual Takedown" and "Tranny Tricks a Blind Man." With titles like these, it is easy to see how daytime reality TV shows like *Springer* or *Maury* have actively participated in reinforcing a transphobic narrative, exerting a major influence on the everyday, passive daytime TV viewer. Cary O'Dell posted an article in 2013 on the website "Pop Matters" that presents data about the average daytime TV viewer that implied that such viewers were overall less educated than the public and tended to be more conservative in values. This dialectical relationship with the viewer and the producer lead to the continual production of these kinds of reality shows.

However, over the last 25 years, issues of trans* representation in

reality TV and media in general has arguably become less transphobic and more “true to life.” As Liz Halloran of the Human Rights Campaign writes, “...knowing a transgender person translates powerfully into positive impressions...”⁴ The platform of reality TV allows for people who may not personally know a trans person to get a general impression on what being trans* can “look like.” Although shows such as *I am Cait* or *I am Jazz* aim to depict a more trans positive depiction of trans* individuals, these heavily edited shows certainly do not provide an adequate representation of *all* trans people - particularly when we consider the racial, class, and gender-conforming representations of transness portrayed in these programs. Nevertheless, I would suggest that shows like these can serve as a stepping stone to understanding trans people and issues for the average American.

Today, many trans* and gender nonconforming individuals have taken to YouTube as a new media platform to create their own representations of self. Similar to the ways that reality television mirrors and models acceptable attitudes and ideas, YouTubers have been becoming the stars of their own respective channels and communities and doing the same towards their own audiences. The aim for many of these trans* YouTubers is to educate and to portray an honest account of the trans experience, taking the labor of trans* representation into their own hands.

When thinking about trans* representation in the media, I think it is crucial to consider the following questions: Are social media sites like YouTube the new way which we will judge and shame others from the safety of our screens? What are the pros and cons of social media, where people are free to represent themselves however they choose to? How much influence does reality television hold now when compared to the early 1990s, when *Springer* and *Maury* were first aired? In other words, how far have we come over the last 25 years in terms of

⁴ Liz Halloram, April 24, 2015. “Survey Shows Striking Increase in Americans Who Know and Support Transgender People,” for the Human Rights Campaign. Available at <http://www.hrc.org/blog/survey-shows-striking-increase-in-americans-who-know-and-support-transgende>.

tele/visual representations of trans* lives and embodiment? What kinds of classed, gendered, and racialized normativities are reproduced and/or interrupted by such representations?

Online Presence and Passing: Trans-Specific Web Communities
Clare McCormick

I found myself considering the Internet's amazing ultra-connectivity while contemplating research topics for our Trans* Studies class. We had recently spent time discussing the life and legacy of Brandon Teena after watching *Boys Don't Cry*, and issues of trans individuals living in isolation (in rural areas, or in communities that are largely non-trans), their lack of support systems, and the impossible politics of passing for survival were on my mind. The Internet seemed to hold the answers to these problems: it's a seemingly ubiquitous force in the United States, and in much of the world, and it holds unique, transcendent powers that allow trans individuals to connect with and support each other in their efforts to navigate a transphobic society, regardless of community members' geographical distance from each other.

I was able to locate an online community that operates under these premises hosted on the website *Reddit*, a collaborative forum and message-board platform that bills itself as "The Front Page of the Internet." The website itself is a collection of many different communities, referred to as "subreddits." Anyone can make their own subreddit, and it can be based around any theme or topic: makeup, dogs, sports, individual's hometowns or cities, and so on. Four years ago, an individual created a subreddit called "r/transpassing." Its premise was basic: trans-identified users would submit photos of themselves ("selfies"), and caption the images with information about themselves, such as their age, pronouns, if they were taking hormones, and if so, how long they've been on them. The purpose of each post was to determine the answer to a question that many trans individuals ask themselves on a daily basis: do I pass? In response, other users would offer constructive criticism.

R/transpassing, and other similar spaces on the Internet, offer trans people the ability to virtually perform what scholar Jane Ward

refers to as “gender labor.” Through online interaction and engagement with each other, *Reddit* users actively help each other produce, modify, and affirm their respective gender identities, offering the support, encouragement, and advice that many don’t have access to in their real world, day-to-day lives. The importance of self-image is especially relevant in our country’s current climate: radically-conservative influences have largely formed a sociopolitical rejection of overt transness; bodies that fall outside of the “charmed circle” of appearances are subject to many types and scales of violence.

The art of taking selfies and posting them in public forums is, at its base, a form of self-preservation: a selfie is a snapshot of who we are; or, at least, who we want other people to think we are. Modern social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are filled with images of our peers’ faces. We subconsciously internalize them, aligning our own images next to them, surreptitiously checking for similarities and anomalies: as scholar Fleur Gabriel puts it, “Social media demand that young people actively and deliberately think about and negotiate their own visibility -- the image they project, the identity they want to have” (Gabriel 2013: 105). R/transpassing is direct in its intent and the actions of its members: there is no obfuscation of filters or tricky angles in the photos that are submitted. In fact, this is a requirement, as established by the community’s self-imposed rules: “The only acceptable edit is color correction for accuracy. We strictly encourage honest photos for honest feedback and/or CC (constructive criticism)” (R/transpassing). The rules call for responses to be of a truthful and helpful nature: “Feedback regarding passing should be both constructive and accurate. Both sugarcoating things and tearing people down defeat the point of the subreddit” (R/transpassing).

However, while the subreddit’s premise holds promise, and its intent is to build up supportive community practices, it has its own legitimate flaws as well. There is an overwhelming whiteness to the community: all of its top-rated submissions are photos of people that are white-passing. The most popular photos are those that align themselves with conventional, heteronormative beauty ideals; photos of individuals

who do not subscribe to these standards have little to zero upvotes or comments, and the comments that are there tend to have a more negative, harsher tone. A further drawback is that the Internet's anonymous nature allows for anyone to participate in these conversations: there's no way to know exactly who is engaging with your photo.

Ultimately, my takeaway from observing this community's engagement with each other was that, while online spaces for trans people to connect with each other are important and should be preserved, they are not immune to real-world issues of inclusivity and conformity. Some questions to consider: Trans spaces on the Internet seem small and scattered; how could they become more broadly accessible? How might communities work towards embracing alternative types of beauty? And what external forces prevent them from already doing so? How do we determine the line between constructive or supportive critique, and the policing of trans bodies?

Oscars and Olympics So Binary?!

Judith Schreier

Almost every human interaction relies on some kind of categorization. Every human being is expected to fit into a specific set of neat, little boxes. Such boxes and categories are for example students vs. professor, or male and female, actor and actress, male athlete or female athlete, or cis and trans*. Not fitting into those boxes comes with problems and actually often leads to exclusion. People who do not fit the categories are seldom represented in popular culture and media. How can we bust those boxes? Why are there still no self-identified trans actors and actresses recognized at the Academy Awards, even though producing movies about trans* lives is somehow considered to be "in vogue"? How can Olympic athletes who do not neatly fit the categories of the Olympic Committee—such as the 800-meter Olympic champion Caster Semenya—cause an international turmoil?

At the Oscar ceremony at the beginning of this year, the movie *The Danish Girl* (2015) was nominated four times. *The Danish Girl* is a movie about Lili Elbe, the first trans woman to undergo gender

confirming surgery during the 1920s and 1930s. Eddie Redmayne is the actor who portrays Lili Elbe's life on screen and he received the nomination *Best Actor* for this. The movie and Redmayne's nomination received a tremendous amount of backlash due to the fact the trans* woman Lili Elbe is portrayed by a non-trans actor. In contrast, the lesbian love story *Carol* (2015), based on Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel, *The Price of Salt*, was another film that was nominated for several Oscars in 2016; but it did not receive the same level of criticism. Instead it received a great amount of praise, even though the actresses' sexuality does not necessarily align with the sexuality of their characters. Seemingly, the category of sexuality is not as fixed and static as the category of gender, which raises questions about the labor that gender performs as a signifier of self and identity.

Winning an Oscar remains to be a big deal for the American, and even international, film industry. The Academy Awards ceremony at the end of each February comes with very strict sets of norms and rules, and of course, limited categories. The most important categories, *Best Actor* and *Best Actress*, are strictly divided by gender. As a result, actors and actresses who do not fit into either of them, have almost no chance of actually winning an Oscar, no matter how good their performance was. Thus, due to the prestige of the Oscars, moviemakers only cast people who have the potential to win the award.

It becomes apparent that the actors that portray queer characters have to fit the norms in terms of gender, race, beauty, thinness, abled-bodiedness, and other categories at the Oscar ceremony in order to win. It was no problem to nominate the actresses of *Carol*, since their gender is one of the categories at the Oscars. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that Eddie Redmayne was cast to play Lili Elbe and not a trans* woman.

Similarities can be drawn to the issues surrounding the Olympics of 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. The fact that Caster Semenya, an Olympic sprinter, who can be categorized as intersex, does not fit the neat categories of male or female athlete caused an enormous outrage. There is no "intersex category" at the Olympics. Subsequently, Semenya has to compete in the male or female category, which is considered to be unfair

by the mainstream media towards the other female athletes, or cannot compete at all. The case of Semenya opens up a discussion around so-called “biological advantage” and gender conformity and ultimately the tension between the analytic categories “gender” and “sex.”

Over the summer, the leading sports brand Nike released a campaign which features trans* athlete Chris Mosier. He could not compete at the Olympics because duathlon is not an Olympic discipline, but he is now a member of the U.S. national men’s team. Before that he competed as part of the women’s team. It is huge step for the sports world that Mosier was able to switch between the teams. Yet again he had to make an either-or decision between the two teams. There is no room for non-binary athletes. Is Nike’s commercial campaign with trans* athlete Chris Mosier genuinely helpful for transgender children? Or does it simply reflect an attempt by Nike to be perceived as open-minded and “contemporary”?

In relation to that, how has Caitlyn Jenner’s transition influenced her image as a (former) Olympic athlete? To what extent is she able to be a role model?

All in all, most institutions in our society are structured by binary categories and breaking out of them remains to be extremely difficult and sometimes impossible. Strict and inflexible categories hinder the representation of several groups of people, in particular minorities and oppressed groups such as the trans community.

What needs to be done to empower trans* kids to dream of futures as actors and actresses and Olympic athletes? What is the role of colleges and schools to make theatre and acting classes and sports be welcoming for everyone? How is it possible to open up the categories at influential institutions, such as the Academy Awards and the Olympics, in the long term? How can we make room for non-binaries?

Queering Racial Activism

Vincent Creer

Too often racial justice and LGBT rights movements are severed from one another, causing queer people of color to constantly compartmentalize their identities. Take me for example. I am a black, gay, genderqueer activist and college student. Whenever I walk into my college's black student Union meetings, I feel obliged to have my blackness come first and my queerness come second. This feeling is only reinforced when members argue that talking about queerness, gender justice, etc. "distracts" us from the "real" work at hand or that focusing on those issues will make our movement less palatable. Similarly, whenever I walk into Pride meetings, I feel obliged to put my queerness first and my blackness second. With Pride Alliances (and other similar factions across college campuses in the US), most of the members are white, so they too feel like talking about the intersections of queerness and blackness is distracting or irrelevant.

As recent examples show, my experience does not exist apart from larger social realities. In an age where "intersectionality" is a household name in almost all social justice communities, we still face un-intersectional politics. For example, we are still having debates about the lack of intersectionality within white feminism. The murders of black women, queer people, and trans people by police brutality are still getting routinely erased in the #BlackLivesMatter movement even though the movement was founded by queer women of color. Queer students at historically black universities still report high rates of homophobia, sexism, femiphobia, and sexual assault. The disabled community still reports discrimination and erasure from just about all modern social movements. Women of color who identify as fat are still excluded from the predominately white fat studies and body positive movements. Many queer and feminist movements still condemn kink communities, arguing they reproduce gendered power structures.

Weigman states that the problem with identity studies is that it requires you to speak as the subject, limiting your possibility of speaking about things you may not identify, as well as requiring you to be the

expert about your identity (Weigman 2012: 8). Identity politics dichotomize categories, obscuring and even erasing the radical potential of queer politics.

The question that remains is *how*. How do we move away from identity politics and towards a process of movement building that is truly inclusive, one that actually builds a more effective base of solidarity? Cohen suggests we must turn to the process of movement-building rooted in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges (Cohen 1997: 448); This movement-building practice is also known as coalition building. Coalitions are at the heart of Weigman's and Cohen's suggestions for change.

However, I would like to problematize one element of coalition building: gender labor. "Gender labor" is a term coined by Jane Ward, describing the effort (emotional, physical, and sexual or otherwise) in performing one's gender to others, validating other's gender, and of co-producing someone's "gender irony, transgression, or exceptionality" (Ward 2010: 237). In my experience, whenever I step into coalitional spaces, the labor of expressing difficult politics is always placed on the most marginalized—women of color, trans women of color, low-income people of color, etc. For example, I participated in a local grassroots movement in Geneva, NY called "Tools for Social Change." This organizing group, composed of members of the Geneva community of various racial, gender, age, ability, and socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g. professors, students at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, working class families in Geneva, city council members, etc.), aims to improve the racial climate of Geneva by giving voice to the most marginalized members of the city (in this case low-income people of color). Their tactics include strategic goal planning and implementation, casual-style discussions, fishbowl discussions, and lobbying. What I found in attending these meetings is that the most marginalized members of the meeting are placed in the position of articulating their lived experience, over and over, to a wide range of privileged bodies: ones who are "empathetic" yet still mess up a lot, ones who think they know more than

they actually do, ones who navigate with a white savior complex (an idea of helping “poor people of color” for the sake of boosting their own self-perception as “good” people, instead of changing the lives of the most marginalized), etc.

This constant articulation of one’s lived experience to an audience full of receptive, faux receptive, and even unreceptive coalition members, is a daunting form of gender labor. To simply exist and create better means for oneself through the privileges of others requires the marginalized subject to expend constant and often times more amounts of gender labor than their privileged counterparts. That is one major problem I find in coalitional spaces. My central question, then, is how do we create a structure of organizing that moves away from identity politics and towards effective solidarity without obliging marginalized subjects to expend excess amounts of gender labor, if any at all?

CONCLUSION

Each of the contributions to our Dialogue on “Gender Labor” and transfeminist scholarship and organizing closed with a series of provocative questions. These questions were intended to open space for achieving dialogue amongst attending participants. While our collectively crafted Dialogue, offered in the first session of the conference, was sparsely attended, we nevertheless enjoyed a spirited and dynamic discussion with the audience participants who listened hard to hear us (literally) and amongst the contributors to the formal Dialogue ourselves. Thinking with our diverse participants, we (unsurprisingly) came to the collective conclusion that *gender as a form of constant labor* is most visible and most viscerally experienced by those whose bodies do not neatly align within the binary regimes of normative signification (i.e. male/man, female/woman) under heteropatriarchy and other normative regimes of power, such as white supremacy, settler colonialism, and ableism. Drawing from the specifically *transfeminist* approach to questions of racial, gender, and economic justice that motivated our Dialogue, we collectively aimed to meet our interlocutors where they were, and to open space for ethical and political reflections on what’s at

stake in a *rapprochement* between feminist, trans, and queer activism in local, national, and representational contexts.

After convening our Dialogue at Seneca Falls, in a gymnasium environment in which we could barely hear ourselves think whilst a concurrent opening panel that drew a much larger group of attendees recited the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, we left feeling more convinced than ever that the questions each student author ended their brief provocations with need to become *central* to all feminist organizing spaces – intellectual and activist alike. The embodied experience of being nearly drowned out by the shoring up of a particular moment of feminist history as that which ought to be revered and remembered at the expense of competing histories and genealogies of contemporary feminist interventions ultimately drove home, to students, the central argument of LGBT 302: Trans*Studies. That is, transfeminist provocations and lines of thought are continually at risk of being marginalized, trivialized, or written out of history – even in feminist spaces! If we have indeed arrived at a “transgender tipping point” as *Time* magazine declared in 2014, how can we best avoid the ghosting or drowning out of the contentious histories and *relationships* that have brought us to this moment? How do we make the labor that gender constantly performs more *materially* central to feminist analyses of oppression, social transformation, and belonging? And, relatedly, or more directly, how might we better distribute the labor of making a critical analysis of gender (as constant) labor more central to feminist work within and beyond the academy?

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