

# Trans/Gender

re:articulate

## Introduction

The past decade has seen a substantial increase in trans representation in mainstream media.<sup>1</sup> As gender historians and theorists Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke argue, in recent years “transgender culture has increasingly appeared as a *mass* culture”.<sup>2</sup> What was previously a “set of subcultures”,<sup>3</sup> sustained by the engagement of, among others, trans artists and activists, is now becoming part of the mainstream. Following actress Laverne Cox’s appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in 2014, this moment has often been referred to as ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’. There are now multiple TV shows featuring positive and complex portrayals of trans characters, such as Cox’s breakthrough *Orange Is the New Black* or the teen drama *Euphoria*. And while much attention has been focused on trans women, the popularity of male and non-binary trans celebrities like actor Elliot Page, artist Kae Tempest, or TV personality Jonathan Van Ness, has also highlighted the diversity of trans identities.

The narrative of progress, however, is just one side of a coin. The other side reveals a much grimmer picture: increased visibility has been accompanied by an often violent backlash against trans people worldwide.<sup>4</sup> For example, there have been severe restrictions on trans rights in the US, where, even after Donald Trump had left office, state legislatures created a “record-breaking year for anti-transgender legislation” in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

This pushback against trans rights has become part of a broader attack on so-called ‘gender ideology’, whose critics posit that ‘gender’ “is a dangerous, if not diabolical, ideology threatening to destroy families, local cultures, civilization, and even ‘man’ himself”.<sup>6</sup> Gender and political theorist Judith Butler argues that the “principal aim of the movement is to reverse progressive legislation won in the last decades by both LGBTQI and feminist movements”.<sup>7</sup> They add: “The anti-gender ideology movement is not opposing a specific account of gender, but seeking to eradicate ‘gender’ as a concept or discourse, a field of study, an approach to social power”.<sup>8</sup> How, then, is the backlash against trans people

connected to wider systems of social power? What can a critical conceptual analysis of gendered oppression add to struggles for equality both in activism and academia? And what has given the term gender so much traction in the first place?

### *Feminism & Women's Studies*

Today, 'gender' is a key concept and analytical category in Cultural Studies, despite its initial neglect in an emerging field that focused more on matters of class and race.<sup>9</sup> When such issues first came to be recognized, it was not in terms of 'gender', though; in earlier introductory or key works to Cultural Studies, we are more likely to see an entry on women's studies and/or feminist criticism.<sup>10</sup> Women's studies analyze the lived experiences, work, achievements, social roles and positions of women. This approach is applicable in a range of subject areas, as it works towards gaining equality of women and men by drawing attention to marginalized voices and questioning systems and cultures of oppression. This form of academic inquiry evolved from the political activities of feminists who were engaged with women's rights movements, also known as women's liberation, fighting against (often violent) oppression in partnership, family and work: "women's studies, like black studies (...), has political not academic roots, and is constituted through the recognition of economic, ideological, sexual and political subordination and exploitation of a social group".<sup>11</sup>

Historically, women were considered as the 'gentler sex', distinguishing them, their abilities and societal roles from those of men. This distinction, which resulted in the marginalization of women's political position and agency, was legitimized through characteristics attributed to women on the grounds of their alleged biological difference to men, which in turn engendered legal, medical, economic and cultural discourses around gender norms and values. The resulting stereotypes contributed to an imbalance between the values attributed to the category of 'male' in opposition to that of 'female', effectively positioning women as an inferior 'other' to men. Feminists have opposed such limiting ideas about women and worked towards giving voice and value to female experiences with the goal to reevaluate and thereby change existing gender relations. In order to do this, women's studies sought a "different starting point" from traditional discourses and disciplines: "that of women". Thus, the field "takes women's sphere of activity, previously marginalized, and places it centrally".<sup>12</sup>

These reevaluations, however, are frequently based on a distinct perception of difference between the sexes. Existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir famously challenged essentializing ideas about the sexes in *The Second Sex* (1949/1962), her discussion of the treatment of women by men throughout history, and proposed that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. In emphasizing the importance of socialization, Beauvoir not only argues against the naturalization of gender roles, but implicitly distinguishes between sex and gender with “biological sex (...) taken to be the raw material which society shaped into gender”.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1970s, ‘gender’ slowly gained ground as a category of critical analysis in the humanities and social sciences. While the sex/gender distinction was able to address the naturalizing tendencies of earlier forms of women’s liberation and opened up new areas of inquiry, feminist activism still often depended on what Judith Butler would later describe as the “the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject”.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the history of feminist movements, such (strategically) essentializing arguments may have proven helpful in creating a subject for political action. At the same time, they have repeatedly led to further exclusions, be this in relation to race, class, ability, citizenship or sexuality, as for example the Combahee River Collective has emphasized.

### *The Performativity of Gender*

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and its follow-up *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler not only criticizes the assumption that womanhood is something essential – based in the alleged fact of the female sex – but also finds fault with a constructivist understanding of gender as separate from sex. For Butler, the problem requires a more radical interpretation:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.<sup>15</sup>

This means that neither gender nor sex should be understood as pre-existing categories. In fact, Butler’s concept of performativity challenges the very distinction between sex as biological and gender as cultural.

Instead, they propose that sex *and* gender emerge in performance. Gender performances are not mere mis/representations of a biological reality, but gender and sex are created together: “the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative”.<sup>16</sup>

In this sense, a baby is not born a girl, but ‘girled’ at birth (or even earlier in the womb) through the speech act of “It’s a girl!”, performed by professionals in the context of institutionalized medical or legal authority.<sup>17</sup> Far from being limited to language, however, gender performativity encompasses a wide variety of practices (of the self) – from ways of talking, to ways of dressing or ways of (not) showing emotion – that are judged by teachers, parents, peers and other authorities. As Butler emphasizes, these gendered practices are not roles the individual subject can take up at random, like roles on a theater stage, but they are closely tied to powerful heteronormative discourses that, in continuously repeating and citing norms, create the phenomena and categories that they appear to only be naming. Sex, in the sense of an undisputed biological given, is therefore a consequence of discriminatory actions, and not its foundation. This opens a space for agency and subversion, where not only traditional gender roles, but the dependence of sexual desire on a given body can be queered: if it’s made, it can be re-made.

Butler’s concern is not to deny the realities of biological bodies; on the contrary, it is to explore how bodies are made to matter (or not matter). Equally, Butler’s goal is not to provide an interpretation of what gender and sex essentially *are*, but to open up a space in which traditional ideas of gender and sex can be *rearticulated*. Reconceptualizing sex and gender means reconceptualizing which bodies matter, it means to work against tendencies that deny people their humanity who live their lives beyond the heteronormative binary:

Such a strategy, I suggest, is crucial to creating the kind of community in which surviving with AIDS becomes more possible, in which queer lives become legible, valuable, worthy of support, in which passion, injury, grief, aspiration become recognized without fixing the terms of that recognition in yet another conceptual order of lifelessness and rigid exclusion.<sup>18</sup>

Butler's queering of gender took place within a specific historical situation in the 1990s, the AIDS crisis, as a reaction against normative practices that threatened the health and well-being of those who did not comply with these norms. 'Queer' became a "term that challenged the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse".<sup>19</sup>

### *The Trans\*/formation of Nature*

Whereas Butler approaches the (gendered) body's materiality through social theory, feminist theorist Karen Barad engages with the natural sciences in order to conceptualize how matter is related to questions of gender. In doing so, Barad follows Butler in their re-conceptualization of gender as queer, but differs from Butler in a central aspect: rather than focusing on the ways in which human bodies are performatively made to matter, Barad is interested in the role of materiality itself. They argue:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every "thing" – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. (...) Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.<sup>20</sup>

While Butler argues for "a return to the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter",<sup>21</sup> Barad sees materiality not as an effect, but as a productive force in itself. Rejecting notions of matter as a passive object of observation or of discursive (re)formation, Barad emphasizes its agency: "Matter is not the given, the unchangeable, the bare facts of nature. It is not inanimate, lifeless, eternal. Matter is (...) creatively regenerative, an ongoing trans\*/formation".<sup>22</sup> By positing trans\*/formation at the core of all being, Barad reimagines materiality as inherently queer, seeking to subvert essentializing ideas about nature that are employed to mark, exclude and brutalize those not fitting into the heteronormative matrix.

In drawing on the work of trans scholar and activist Susan Stryker, Barad

also gestures toward the practical and political implications of their intervention. Barad suggests that understanding matter, nature and gender as trans does not only work against the naturalization of those concepts, but that trans as a critical category with its emphasis on ongoing trans\*/formation undermines all ideas of stable and coherent bodies. Thus, Barad goes against viewing disciplines such as physics or biology as institutions that provide insight into essential truths (about sex or gender, for instance) and instead contends that the so-called natural sciences can contribute to the de-essentialization of social categories and may open up new possibilities for those marginalized and oppressed under binary/heterosexual power structures. Referring to the political potential of such theorizing, they ask: “What would it mean to reclaim our trans\* natures as natural? Not to align ourselves with essence, or the history of the mobilization of ‘nature’ on behalf of oppression, but to recognize ourselves as part of nature’s doings in its very undoing of what is natural?”<sup>23</sup>

The reclaiming of “our trans\* nature as natural” would enable a return to questions of biology without re-creating universalizing, homogenizing and essentializing identities and subject positions. As Jules Gill-Peterson asserts, “one of the important differences between queer and trans studies has been around the insistence of the material”.<sup>24</sup> This renewed insistence allows to understand bodies as lived entities whose biological transformations affect individuals and their material positioning in the world: different bodies generate different affordances that enable different experiences of situations and different ways of doing things. This, then, might also enable to politicize the body and the material violence it has to endure in new ways. Hence, practices of care, of mutual aid and emotional support, which attempt to “ameliorate the affective and/or material deprivation that saturates trans life under racial capitalism and trans antagonism”, could more clearly be understood as a political act.<sup>25</sup> To go beyond both the ideas of a natural body as given and a natural body as social effect, bodies have to be wrestled from the compartmentalization of nature and culture, the material and the discursive.

### *The Economy of Gender*

The re-imagining of nature as inherently queer does not automatically free us from binary and heteronormative coercion, however. Only political action can change the situation. For that, we need a better

understanding of the specific *social* forces that motivate the continuing effectiveness of a binary understanding of gender, including associated roles and stereotypes. Central to these forces are capitalist economic demands. But if, within today's economic order, it is only their labor-power that people bring to the free ('sex-blind' and 'color-blind') market which counts, why should it matter whether someone is male or female, lesbian or gay, queer or trans? Especially within an increasingly automated, service- and consumption-oriented economy, any differences between man and woman should not play much of a role: companies regularly champion 'diversity' and the gender pay gap is apparently closing in many professions. So why is it, then, that "humanity is still powerfully inscribed with one or the other gender"? <sup>26</sup>

To answer this question, we have to look beyond the workplace proper and understand that the influence of the economy does not stop at the factory gates, or the door to the home office, but extends to the household and the family. We have to ask: where does the labor-power come from that a worker sells to their employer? In order to return to the workplace refreshed and replenished the next day, workers need food and shelter, a place to sleep and eat, and they need emotional and psychological well-being. <sup>27</sup> While a worker can use their wage to buy pork-chops and pillows, apps and magazines, this does not automatically translate into a nurturing, caring and inspiring home. Someone has to *do* the nurturing, caring and inspiring, not to speak of the cleaning and tidying. Within the capitalist mode of production, however, such reproductive work "is not deemed necessary labor at all". <sup>28</sup> It is simply taken for granted (like nature). But where is it coming from?

The traditional solution is to have these tasks performed for free, or at least on the cheap, within the so-called domestic sphere of the heterosexual family home that reproduces the work force and stabilizes the capitalist economy. And even though there are exceptions, this unwaged reproductive work is usually done by a woman – in contrast to the 'productive' waged work men perform outside the house. Accordingly, when these tasks are paid for by the welfare state to support the reproduction of labor-power, in nurseries, pre-school or day-care centers, for example, it is mostly women who perform it (and mostly on top of their own family duties). In order to justify such division and subsequent devaluation, "the social content of gender was 'written upon the skin' of the concrete individuals". <sup>29</sup> This means that what was socially and

structurally necessary was deemed a natural and personal quality: women, ‘by nature’, are better at these things. If such processes of naturalization fail, if bodies are resistant to such inscriptions, if they refuse to be inscribed into binary categories or deliberately transverse these inscriptions, they are likely to be perceived as an unruly threat. In this oppressive context, caring for, or intimately desiring others beyond the reproductive family unit, can be seen as sabotaging the work of the capitalist machine.

Of course, traditional bourgeois family structures are no longer the rule – if they ever have been. Nonetheless, these structures still provide the norm on which the capitalist economy is built. Other forms, like families where both man and woman work to make ends meet, or single mother households, but also affluent single households, have to find alternative ways to fulfil these expectations and to reenergize the power to labor: by relying on what is left of the welfare state, by consuming cheap processed food or ordering ready-made meals, by paying a cleaner, a gardener, perhaps also a nanny or a carer for the elderly, by purchasing sex, ordering stimulants online or finding relaxation in a yoga class. But even if the reproductive work is now outsourced, often on a global scale, commodified and *waged*, it is still commonly performed by women – or racialized minorities. (In practice, of course, these categories frequently intersect.<sup>30</sup>) If an employer would pay workers enough so that they, in turn, could adequately pay all workers involved in re-producing their labor-power, it would be impossible to make a profit. Thus, the workers that produce the commodity ‘labor-power’ have to be paid less. Again, it is usually racialized and gendered minorities who bear the brunt of this work. In order to legitimize their underpayment, their abilities have to be devalued.

Gendered and racialized workers are often *made* to lack specific skills to compete on the general labor market: racialized immigrants, for example, are denied necessary language training and recognition of their education; female workers are routinely treated as potential child-bearers (independent of the fact whether they actually want a child or whether they can even have a child) and consequently denied the investment of further training, because they are expected to leave the job any time soon to raise children or go into part-time (waged) work.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, immigrants and women are often reduced to the allegedly ‘natural’ skills of caring, cleaning and cooking that they have apparently acquired for



free, and thus have not to be remunerated for.<sup>32</sup> Those who fail to live up to the racialized and gendered expectations of the reproductive work place, like trans people, have even more “trouble finding work”, and in the case they find (informal) work they are frequently “subject to harassment and the risk of violence on the job”, devaluing both their work and their personhood, further contributing to social isolation.<sup>33</sup> (Which is not to say that those inscribed as straight, male and white *necessarily* fare better: if they fall out of ‘productive’ waged labor, reproductive services and other feminized or “queer work”<sup>34</sup> might be out of reach or unimaginable; instead, long-time unemployment becomes a dreaded specter for those surplus to the demands of the capitalist economy.)

The current capitalist economic order depends on distinctions of gender and race for devaluing (reproductive) labor; for that, the system constantly produces and reproduces gendered and racialized hierarchies of power. Such structural discrimination does not rely on conscious misogyny and bigotry, but it still needs people acting in ways that support these structures: stereotypical depictions of women and BIPOC as carers and service providers, for example, contribute to enabling the naturalizing inscriptions of gender and race. And as the entanglement of gender and race (and age and class, e.g. where girls perform care work in poor families) shows, different modes of discrimination neither exclude each other, nor should they preclude alliances with others who find themselves at the wrong end of the economy.

### *Conclusion*

Scrutinizing and challenging gendered norms, in activism and in academia, can help to defy the normative forces that coerce humans to obey political and economic demands. What such critical practices do *not* threaten are families or local cultures, as the opponents of an apparent “gender ideology” fear; rather, these practices can come to support new forms of family and community. What the critique *does* question is the role of heteronormatively gendered family-households and racial segregation in upholding exploitative economic practices, the proceedings of a patriarchal and imperialist society, and the psychological and bodily harm that comes with it. In this sense, transgender is not the product of a dreaded “gender ideology”, but a potential threat to existing ideologies of an unjust society. While the specific corporeal and social experiences of gendered, racialized, ableist, ageist and other forms of discrimination might be incommensurable, the structures that enable

them are not. As Eliza Steinbock argues: “studying these shared material violences will enable scholars and activists to connect nodes of oppressive mechanisms and be able to recognize how (what looks like) gender operates in the vein of other social and subjectifying processes”.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to the anxieties voiced by opponents of “gender ideology”, others have expressed hope towards the possible unmaking of oppressive ideologies around gender (and the family). At the same time, Gleeson and O’Rourke point out that a lot of weight in this regard has fallen on trans people, especially women, who have been most visible in recent years: “As she (the transgender woman) is brought to bear on all topics of social weight, she instrumentalises herself – trans as condition, as a way of being, as a mode of life – and is made to bear the burden of the entire gendered order”.<sup>36</sup> Rather than (only) focusing on how trans may destabilize gendered hierarchies, Kay Gabriel therefore suggests that we keep in mind the subjective dimension of trans experience and “the *enabling of bodily autonomy* as a critical dimension of social life and political struggle”.<sup>37</sup>

Female, queer, transgender – the struggles for personal recognition, bodily autonomy and political subjectivity are entangled and articulated in specific historical contexts. In the United States, the early months of 2022 have seen an intensified push for anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ legislation; this simultaneous attack on bodily autonomy is hardly coincidental and points to the interlinked struggles for, among others, reproductive justice and gender-affirming care. What theories of performativity and trans\*/formation emphasize is the impossibility of grounding any liberatory project on a given essence or unity. Rather, it has to be based on the common opposition to inhumane (economic) practices and coercive cultural norms that produce exclusion and exploitation. In order to make a “liberatory reworking of sexual and gender relations”<sup>38</sup> possible, it is first necessary to ensure that anyone can engage in such collective struggles on their own terms.

1. Today, the terms trans and transgender are commonly used as umbrella terms to describe a wide variety of identities; for an overview, cf. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 2nd ed., New York: 2017 (2008), especially pp. 24-25, 36-39.
2. Jules Joanne Gleeson & Elle O'Rourke, "Introduction", in: *Transgender Marxism*, eds. Jules Joanne Gleeson & Elle O'Rourke, London: 2021, 1-32, here p. 1.
3. Gleeson & O'Rourke, "Introduction", p. 1.
4. Cf. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley & Johanna Burton (eds.), *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Cambridge: 2017.
5. Priya Krishnakumar, "[This record-breaking year for anti-transgender legislation would affect minors the most](#)", *CNN Politics*, April 15, 2021 (accessed 28 March 2022).
6. Judith Butler, "[Why is the idea of 'gender' provoking backlash the world over?](#)", *The Guardian*, October 23, 2021 (accessed 29 March 2022).
7. Ibid.
8. Quoted in Jules Gleeson, "[Interview with Judith Butler. 'We need to rethink the category of woman'](#)", *The Guardian*, September 7, 2021 (accessed 26 May 2022).
9. Cf. Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures. A Feminist Critique", *Screen Education* 34 (1980), 37-49.
10. Cf. Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester: 2002 (1995), p. 121-136; Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., London: 2004 (1995), p. 164-208.
11. Editorial Group, "Women's Studies Group: Trying to Do Feminist Intellectual Work", in: *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination*, eds. Women's Studies Group, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, London: 1978, 7-17, here p. 9.
12. Ibid.
13. Rosa Lee, "Judith Butler's Scientific Revolution. Foundations for a Transsexual Marxism", in: *Transgender Marxism*, eds. Jules Joanne Gleeson & Elle O'Rourke, London: 2021, 62-69, here p. 65.
14. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: 1990, p. 5.
15. Ibid., p. 7.
16. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York: 1993, p. 2.
17. Ibid., p. 232.
18. Ibid., p. 21.
19. David Eng, Judith Jack Halberstam & José Muñoz, "Introduction. What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?", *Social Text* 23:3-4 (2005), 1-17, here p. 1.
20. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham: 2007, p. 132.
21. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 9.
22. Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities. Trans\*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings", *GLQ. A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21:2-3 (2015), 387-422, here p. 411.
23. Ibid., p. 413.
24. Aren Z. Aizura, Marquis Bey, Toby Beauchamp, Treva Ellison, Jules Gill-Peterson & Eliza Steinbock, "Thinking with Trans Now", *Social Text* 38:4 (2020), 125-147, here p. 141.
25. Cameron Awkward-Rich & Hil Malatino, "Meanwhile, t4t", *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9:1 (2022), 1-8, here p. 3.
26. Maya Andrea Gonzalez & Jeanne Neton, "The Logic of Gender. On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection", in: *Contemporary Marxist Theory. A Reader*, eds. Andrew Pendakis et al., New York: 2014, 149-174, here p. 150.
27. Cf. Sean Cashbaugh, "[Back to Basics with Labor-Power. The Problem of Culture and Social Reproduction Theory](#)", *Lateral* 10:2 (2021) (accessed 24 June 2022).
28. Gonzales & Neton, "The Logic of Gender", p. 152.
29. Ibid., p. 164.
30. Cf. Silvia Federici, "The Reproduction of Labour Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution", in: *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism. Contemporary Themes and Theoretical Issues*, ed. Maurizio Atzeni, Houndmills: 2014, 85-107.
31. Cf. Maya Andrea Gonzalez, "[Communization and the Abolition of Gender](#)" (2011), *The Anarchist Library* (accessed 24 June 2022).
32. Cf. Nancy Fraser, "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism", in: *Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya, London: 2017, 21-36.
33. Michelle O'Brien, "Trans Work: Employment Trajectories, Labour Discipline and Gender Freedom", in: *Transgender Marxism*, eds. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, London: 2021, 47-61, here p. 57.
34. Ibid., p. 49.
35. Aizura et al., "Thinking with Trans Now", p.135.
36. Gleeson & O'Rourke, "Introduction", p. 11-12.
37. Kay Gabriel, "Gender as Accumulation Strategy", *Invert Journal* 1 (2020), *emphasis added* (accessed 23 May 2022); archived [here](#).
38. Ibid.

quote as: re:articulate, “Trans/Gender”, *Current Issues in Cultural Studies*,  
cultural-studies.org, September 2022.