

Neda Genova in Conversation with
Mijke van der Drift

A Conversation on Transfeminism as Anti-Colonial Politics

Bionotes: Philosopher and educator Mijke van der Drift works on ethics as a focal point in a multi-disciplinary research about social transformation. Van der Drift is tutor at the Royal College of Art, London and the Royal Academy of Art, the Hague. They are a Research Associate at the University of Cambridge in 2020-21, as part of the Revolutionary Papers project, in collaboration with the London School of Economics and the University of the Western Cape. In addition, van der Drift is currently working on their book *Non normative Ethics: The Dynamics of Trans Formation*. They obtained a Ph.D. from Goldsmiths, University of London. Their current project focuses on multilogical ethics and generosity, and is provisionally titled *The Logic of Loss in Bonding*. The book chapter “Radical Transfeminism: Trans as Anti-Static Ethics Escaping Neoliberal Encapsulation” co-written with Nat Raha is recently published in *New Feminist Studies: Twenty-first-century Critical Interventions*, ed. Jennifer Cooke, with Cambridge University Press.

Neda Genova teaches at Goldsmiths University of London and London South Bank University and holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths. Her research is situated at the intersection of post-communist studies and media and cultural theory. She is interested in feminist and postcolonial theory, the politics of humour and laughter and post-communist digital culture. She is a member of the editorial collective of the Bulgarian-language activist-academic magazine *dVERSIA (dBEPЦИЯ)*.

Royal College of Art/University of Cambridge
mijkedrft@rca.ac.uk

London Bank University/Goldsmiths,
genovan@lsbu.ac.uk. Mijke

Abstract: For this piece we were provoked by an anti-trans moment that took place during the School of Politics and Critique in September 2020. Instead of engaging in a mere “rebuttal” of anti-trans discourse and its reductive, exclusionary claims, with this text we aim to open up a space of exchange and learning that takes form of a feminist conversation. We discuss the historical and political entrenchment of colonial, capitalist and anti-trans projects to emphasise why a solid trans politics will always hold an anti-colonial agenda to the fore. Critically appraising some unfortunate intellectual and political impasses—as the capturing of feminist politics in schemata of biological determinism or the complicity of white bourgeois feminism in anti-Blackness and colonial exploitation—we shed light on the emancipatory potential of radical transfeminism. The conversation draws on lessons from the writings and practice of many engaged in formulating the stakes of black feminist, anti-colonial and trans politics of solidarity, thus actualizing the insight that we never think or act in isolation from one another.

Keywords: trans politics, feminism, anti-colonialism, relationality, ethics of care

Neda Genova: The wish to engage in the conversation that unfolds on the next few pages was most immediately provoked by an anti-trans moment at the 2020 edition of the School for Politics and Critique. For unrelated reasons, I had to leave prematurely on the second day of the School and did so trying to suppress my anger and frustration at a discourse that is not only profoundly retrograde and unimaginative, but also, I believe, deeply harmful to a feminist project of building solidarities across different modes of patriarchal, colonial and capitalist oppression. Of course, it goes without saying that this incident didn’t completely eclipse the experience of the other two days, which were otherwise warm, stimulating and nourishing, full of conversations with kind and interesting people—for which I remain grateful. And yet, for me, a sense of having left some “unfinished business” in the midst of Dunya lingered on and kept irking me in the days and weeks that followed: some thoughts were unarticulated, some words not shared, some connections not made.

Thus, the possibility of using the format of conference proceeding to actually explore its processual character came as a welcome invitation to revisit and rethink some of the reasons for my initial anger, but also to consider how it can be reshaped and rerouted so as to help build a different kind of space for intellectual and political exchange. I decided to ask my friend, colleague and ally Mijke van der Drift to engage in a conversation on trans politics as an emancipatory and transformative site of struggle and I am extremely thankful that they agreed to participate in it. To me, the act of wedging this collaborative text into and in relation to the other contributions of the conference proceedings means adding yet another set of perspectives and political propositions to the conversation around trans politics. However, it also means something more: actively resisting accounts that reduce the emancipatory potential of transness to a caricature-like version of identity politics and that refuse to take seriously the significant theoretical production and political practice of transness to think through some of the most pertinent issues of today (as the crucial link between anti-colonial and trans struggles). These anti-trans approaches not only preclude the possibility for feminist solidarity but also re-territorialize feminist theory and politics on the terrain of straight-jacketing notions of biological determinism, essences and self-evidential realities (cloaked under the guise of a not always precise theoretical production). So, against such approaches we set this conversation on transfeminism as a mode that enacts a form of learning and listening that will hopefully lend itself to more affirmative and transformative ends. This means that more than being a mere rebuttal of anti-trans discourse, it also seeks to generate different connections, questions, theoretical lines of flight, collective spaces for exchange, routes of learning and social transformation.

NG: I know that as a firm anti-capitalist holding a scepticism towards simplified identity politics, you wouldn't advocate a thinking of trans as an identitarian or exclusionary category, would you? How can we think trans politics otherwise?

Mijke van der Drift: Identity politics currently has quite a bad name, but it is always worthwhile to recall that the term has its origin in the Combahee River Collective. In the 1970s this collective rethought feminist Marxism to include the politics of Black women, against a

universalizing drive—hence to include their identity. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor recently published *How We Get Free* about this group and how their work came to be.¹ To learn from the Combahee River Collective, Marquis Bey² proposes how to do this in a particularly pertinent manner in order to show that their work supports a Black anarchic reading of inclusive politics against the strain of excluding universalities. I think one of the key points we can take away for a solid trans politics is looking for shared or parallel lines of duress between different positionalities and identifying differences in order to lend mutual support. This means that there are social pressures that are, for instance, shared between trans femmes, trans women, and non-trans women because these pressures are rooted in misogyny. Such social pressures undo complexities and differences between lives: it is a homogenizing duress that enables access for some while removing access for others. Simultaneously, it should be acknowledged that certain pressures do not reach in the same way all women, for instance women and femmes that are a target of misogyny as part of pressures of racialization and especially anti-Blackness; pressures because they are poor, precarious, or are otherwise not included in the social sphere. This is where “white feminism” went wrong—not because the misogyny in bourgeois circles is not real, but because the social power that white bourgeois women do have is used without interest in aligning their power with the liberation of other women and femmes, who also shoulder different forms of duress. In that sense, a striving for rights and equality follows a politics that has been instigated by the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeen and eighteen centuries. There the demand voiced by the middle classes was to access power and privilege often by partaking in the project of colonisation—this, of course, to the detriment of the poor.

NG: This question of misogyny is important in relation to some of the premises of anti-trans politics—as argued in a recent special issue of the *Sociological Review* on TERF war,³ the positioning of cis women as being in “danger” from trans women (for example, in dis-

¹ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

² Marquis Bey, *Anarcho-Blackness: Notes Towards a Black Anarchism* (Edinburgh and Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

³ Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent, “TERF Wars: An Introduction,” *The Sociological Review* 68.4. (2020):677-98.

courses around “toilet safety”) draws from a reservoir of historically solidified notions of female “fragility” and “weakness” in relation to cis men. So, it is crucial to understand that the trans-exclusionary argument always falls back also on those it is supposedly meant to “protect” or “safeguard”—its misogynist structure affects cis women, trans women and other femmes, yet, of course, in very different ways. Further to this, Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent also make a point about the racist “undertones” of such discourses. Do you think that such arguments are valid—i.e., what do anti-Blackness, racism and anti-trans politics have in common?

MD: Transmisogyny is often explained like that, which underlines how transmisogyny is a form of misogyny. To posit a debate over the terms of misogyny then helps us see feminism as a lively and pluralist landscape—Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent indeed propose such an account. It is very interesting that they draw attention to racialization as “masculinising” Black women and femme bodies in order to read them as aggressive. The issue is of course that as soon as surveillance is drawn into any scene this leads to the import of aggression, rather than the removal of it, and Black bodies have been surveilled since the beginning of the slave trade. What the discourse around transmisogyny often overlooks is the wider framework in which surveillance and encapsulation emerges from colonial mandates. This is really a point that in Europe, where we are discussing the issue, colonialism is exported over its borders, but this precludes acknowledging how the tools for oppression and duress were created in the colonies and brought back here. Surveillance is one example, but the first modern prison was a slave ship: it really bears reminding ourselves of that. This could then inform how we look at the discussion as a whole—what is at stake and by what means is the discussion propelled? The aim is to exclude trans women and femmes from spaces, discussions, and resources that are needed for survival or flourishing. These forms of carceral thinking—exclude, surveil, and punish—are emerging from Europe’s colonial training.

A solid trans politics is thereby anti-colonial in nature—this means that the lives, safety and the possibility of the flourishing of Black and Indigenous women and femmes are, and should be, firmly on the agenda of trans politics. This in turn implies that there is no sin-

gle model that can be used for liberation, namely indigenous women are not liberated through Western statist models. Instead, indigenous communities should have their autonomy as well as their territory and resources returned. A similar consideration counts for Black (trans) women and femmes—it is not up to a white Eurocentric politics to decide what counts as liberation and safety. The question of liberation involves centring perspectives of marginalized peoples and communities that have been subjected to the strongest social pressures. These examples show that trans politics cannot lean on centralized notions of what liberation is and is thereby necessarily plural.

This means that instead of ignoring difference, trans politics is interested in differences and also in overlaps. This is because trans politics starts from a deep understanding of social isolation, and therefore the attendant need for mutual care and mutual aid, which adds a strong sense of a politics of solidarity that is not predicated upon saviourism. An insistence on recognition often comes as a response to the duress of erasure and its accompanying violence. However, it is reductive to claim that recognition is all there is to trans politics. On the contrary, recognition is merely a basic claim that leads to a deeper understanding of what a politics of identification needs—namely agency and a deep understanding of relationalities that are not always carried on the surface. Some forms of recognition play very local roles, to sort out world-making in quite specific scenes, but this doesn’t mean that they are not valid outside of that scene. This is also why there is a link between transfeminisms and Crip/Disability politics—not every marker is carried on the surface, yet this should not need to lead to a stripping of agency (for instance, see the work of Eli Clare or Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha⁴).

NG: I wonder if you could expand a bit on this claim that a politics of identification needs agency and an understanding of relationalities? Also, is “politics of identification” different than “identity politics,” because the way I have always understood the latter is as in terms of politics that depart from fixed identities rather than the desire to build alliances—and for this, the reading of Haraway’s call to priv-

⁴ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, B.C.: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

ilege “affinities, not identities”⁵ has been very important? Finally, when you write of “relationalities [...] carried on the surface,” do you mean this in the sense of (bodily) vulnerability and markers of difference?

MD: A claim to a trans identity, rather than a claim that relies on stable categories, is a relational proposition, that taps into the various modes of sociality including forms of liberation politics. To state one is trans femme or a trans woman holds the social actuality in regard, without foreclosing a liberatory potentiality. Identification in this sense is indeed a form of relationality that comes close to affinity, with an acknowledgement that relationalities are specific, local, and require translation across different contexts. A relationality carried on the surface means that when inscriptions are visible and tangible in the social realm, it opens one up to scrutiny, violence, erasure and displacement. So, there needs to be an awareness of the affirmative claim to relationality as well as a simultaneous awareness of how modes of relation are interrupted by hegemonic assumptions and violence. However, not every trans woman has a politics of relationality, just like not every non-trans woman pursues a politics of liberation. Let’s say, me and Caitlin Jenner have not so much in common at all: neither socially, economically, nor politically. Even the shared awareness of social violence might be very limited: or we come with very different insights into that violence. Reductive claims to epistemic certainty, that we see emerge within anti-trans politics, bypass these relational insights. Such exclusionary politics neither liberate nor protect anything but assumptions. It is interesting to emphasise this relationality at this stage, because a politics that relies on excluding differences is not shared by many women that are included in the term “women” by anti-trans campaigners. If such campaigns then need to specify the terms of their exclusion as relational terms this is exposed as subjective and relative. Affirmative relational politics are always already situated.

The relational as prior to the categorical contrasts with a politics of “white innocence” that we can discern in statements coming predominantly from white cis women. The comparative contrast drawn up is one of “women” vs. “trans women” (even though they might

not use this term), in which cis women claim positions of innocence and victimhood. While there is a foundational misogyny in the colonial project (see the work of Silvia Federici⁶), the claimed juxtaposition erases the complicity of white women in the colonial project by proposing an imaginary innocence, as if white women have only been recipients of violence. This is markedly untrue. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae⁷ recently published a great work mapping out the violence in the Jim Crow era, when white women were foundational for supporting, upholding, and lobbying for the maintenance of racist laws. That this history is not over could recently be witnessed in the case when the white woman Amy Cooper called the police to retaliate against being called out for irresponsible behaviour by Christian Cooper (no relation), who is a Black man. The trope of innocence that often features in anti-trans messaging can be directly aligned with the racist tropes that have often been used to perpetuate violence towards marginalized communities. Amy Cooper directly tapped into that trope. So, the understanding of the claims against trans women as rooted in such a weaponized innocence, needs to be situated in the colonial attitudes that have often been used in attacks that uphold the norm. Mind, we are not here talking about “actual relations” because anti-trans violence takes the form of categorical accusations and the categorical innocence that is tapped into, is thus a weaponized innocence that has been honed in the colonial project as part of the patriarchal divide that assigns aggression to men and innocence to women. Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence*⁸ is a great book that unpacks this trope. It should be noted that while this innocence is used against trans women and femmes, it is first and foremost a tool that is honed in racist structures and kept alive there, even if it moves across different political realms. It should be noted that these tools operate differently in different realms, and that a politics of innocence levied against white trans people works quite less severely than when there is racialisation at play. This is the nature of tools: that they can operate in various contexts, but in each context in a different manner. However, these are the tools that uphold the master’s house, to paraphrase Audre Lorde. This is why white politics are colonial politics at their root, and there cannot be any trans liberation without attending to anti-rac-

⁶ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014).

⁷ Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *The Haraway Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 7–45.

ist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-colonial politics. In a similar fashion liberatory politics, or theory itself, are also traveling from South to North across the colonial divide, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui⁹ notes.

NG: What do you make of accounts that implicitly or explicitly discard the possibility of departing from a gender binary in terms of it being “tautological identity-formation” following the model of “I am what I say I am”?

MD: A binary in “gender” or, even more hilariously, “biology” as a sign of reality, at minimum misses the point that biology is a cultural science invented in Europe. A biological account is not *per se* “naturalised” in different places, partly because the social is organized in different terms in different communities and parts of the world, or because the “biological” terms are not relevant as such. This does not mean that there are not physical realities and differences—of course there are—but these differences get actuated differently in different social categories. Also, in these propositions about the primacy of a “biological reality” the racist character of the reduction inherent to this notion is often overlooked. With an anti-trans political readiness of self-objectification by reducing ethics, economic relations, and sociality into a biological essence, the question arises where else are their proponents ready to go with such notions of “biological difference”? There’s an entire history of violent claims hiding behind these statements. Furthermore, I am often rather stunned by the audacity of making such “biological claims” as a means of claiming *feminism*. A large part of the feminist movement has been explicitly working against this reductive claim of biology as destiny. My mother is often livid when encountering such statements, to a large extent because as a feminist she had to fight so hard against such claims.

Furthermore, I think that putting out such a statement shows the intellectual poverty of the anti-trans messaging. To reduce social life to “biological essence” places one to the right of Aristotle’s essentialist metaphysics. However, it is worth noting here that for Aristotle there was a quite total separation between theory and practice: it would not have been possible in Ancient Greece to make such tele-

ological statements that reduce “genders” or “species,” so you will, to a simple function or social space, which is really the later eugenic reading of his work. A practical reading of Aristotle’s ethics holds the space for an ethical formation of agents; and once this space is open, the rest is politics. So, Aristotle is patriarchal because these are the politics that he imposes upon a model of agential fluidity. In contrast, “biological readings” claim a post-political space for “sex or gender” that is mind-bogglingly conservative: it prescribes action on the basis of one’s physicality. It’s quite flat and even eugenic.

As remarked upon earlier, terms can function in local contexts to nuance modes of relationality that store memory, relationalities, and social insights; to treat them as tautological is quite missing the point of what terms are doing in social contexts. In the same way to claim a pregnant trans man is a “woman” is missing out on the duress, life, and insights this man carries along. Terms are not only universalizing categories but work on the social level to link and explain what is faced.

NG: It is interesting that you invoke the term “post-political” here. I often take issue with this notion when it is used to describe post-communist processes of transformation that allegedly have done away with political discourse, but rather can only articulate concerns in moral, cultural or aesthetic terms. Often such diagnoses are made from an explicitly leftist perspective, but I think that paradoxically they result in very dull and totalizing accounts of the (post-communist) public sphere. I don’t want to digress too much, though, so can you say a few words about what you mean when saying that the abovementioned biological readings claim a post-political space of “sex or gender”?

MD: I like your astute remark about processes of post-communist transformation that are reduced to language, aesthetics and morality. This really works to distract from the quite aggressive politics that undergird these transformations, don’t you think?

A similar distraction can be understood to reduce a trans sociality and politics to biology. From a philosophical perspective these debates have been held over time and found closure. There is a whole (peer reviewed) article on the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

⁹ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonization*, trans. Molly Geidel (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

on “Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues” written by Talia Mae Bettcher²⁰ about this. Tragic from a realistic perspective is of course that such anti-trans debates instigate actual violence against trans women, trans femmes, and also against cis women and femmes, because they are allies or taken to be trans. They also create more routes for duress in a society that misses out on the allyship of trans people and queers.

Violence is enabled by structural inequalities. However, a politics of inclusion often overlooks who is left out to access the rights that have been granted because they lack the financial means, as Nat Raha²¹ remarks. This makes anti-trans politics extra sad, because they aim to create distance where there is existing solidarity between women and cis women, which is needed in these times of right-wing aggression and austerity. Curiously, the language of victimization is tapped into by dominant majorities, as if the terminology of structural oppression is the only way to make any political point. It diffuses a lot of debates from the real difficult discussions about how to create solidarities, how to make networks for social survival among a host of people that receive pressures and also how to put care, rather than distancing, at the heart of debates on sociality. Taking discussions in the direction of the much harder work of accountability; undoing the disparities created by misogyny, queer and transphobia; activating reparations for colonialism and the enslavement of Black people; and returning land and resources to indigenous communities all require a complex ethical skill set that is actively undermined by a politics of duress. Right-wing feminism evades these complexities by emphasising distance and reliance on categorizations, rather than looking at relationalities. What we can discern is this huge investment in retaining and honing the languages and concepts that are at the heart of structural violence, rather than embracing the work that needs to be done to undo those violences, their historically ingrained effects—including their epistemic bulwarks, such as essentialisms. As Robin Kelley²² reminds us, the only liberation is total liberation.

²⁰ Talia Bettcher, “Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Fall 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-trans/?fbclid=IwARoFT8WRC19OPAYxaprgNEQUllgtX7FCIG8XQmhzdONDhROe5OS7SaZH9w>.

²¹ Nat Raha, “Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116-3 (2017): 632–46.

²² Robin D.G. Kelley, “Internationale Blues: Revolutionary Pessimism and the Politics of Solidarity” (lecture, London School of Economics, London, England, 2019).

To make a small remark here on violence on the internet—there is a lot of it, and it is not only famous anti-trans agitators like J.K. Rowling who receive really nasty messaging, even death threats. This is the life for many non-famous trans women and femmes. This is why *Mermaids*, the U.K. based organization working for the rights and well-being of trans children, immediately offered Rowling their empathy when she recounted her past experience with violence. Trans people are intimately aware of violence, because they receive it a lot. Somehow this disappears from essentialist debates.

NG: Yes, I actually remember reading a recent interview with Judith Butler²³ in which she is asked to comment on the abusive language used against Rowling and makes a very similar point—that while she doesn’t think that anyone should suffer harassment, it is quite perplexing to not enquire about the violence waged against trans people all over the world... Finally, I wanted to ask what do you think that a resistance to a reduction of sexual difference to the “biological reality” of a binary between men and women has to do with a theme which I know is important to your work: i.e., with undoing certain logics of ordering?

M.D.: Once we are on track to question how certain orders are called into being—this means that there is some distance between categories and social life—it becomes interesting to interrogate what certain orders are for. Homogenizing categories are put in the service of control. A question, then, arises: who wants to control what or whom, and to what ends? Unfortunately, white women—especially but not only bourgeois women—have often been the guardians of the norm. This partly explains why so many white women vote for Trump, who is known to be a harasser of women: whiteness trumps gender. Since white politics are inherently masculine, whiteness is the first norm that will be defended. Secondly, we see white women defending the masculine child, for instance by defending segregation (see McRae for a historical account but also look at contemporary accounts of the link between postcodes and school separation). When we think of anti-trans politics as defending the white, masculine norm, using explicitly racist tropes of white innocence,

²³ Judith Butler and Alona Ferber, “Judith Butler on the Culture Wars, J.K. Rowling and Living in “Anti-Intellectual Times””, *New Statesman* (September 22, 2020), <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-times>.

it is clear that the norm is defended against the incursion of trans women and femmes, who have been historically excluded from living a full life under this same white regime, and certainly when they are racialised. An understanding of these interlocking pressures and exclusions should inform a trans politics as an anti-colonial politics, rather than simply or merely a politics that requires anti-trans discourse to desist.

In the end trans politics is about flourishing with the many differences that fall both within the nomer “trans” as well as outside of that nomer. Trans and cis lesbians, bi women and femmes, as well as allied straight women have forever collaborated, loved, raised children and cared for their communities, partly because they share and shape the same community. There is a deep and profound politics in care as a politics of making relations and as part of a wider political action. It offers a complex ethical skill set, which rests on a politics of listening, collaboration and mutual aid that form the basis for a robust politics of liberation.