# Gender Essentialism K

The feminist epistemology standpoint inherently legitimizes a gender duality. By defining women as a distinct social and biological group with certain characteristic experiences, the Aff divides the world into male and female and erases the multiplicity of gender possibilities in society. Non-cis folk are further excluded by every gain that the aff achieves for cis women.

#### Ferguson[[1]](#footnote-1)

An important tension within current feminist theory is that between articulating women's voice and deconstructing gender. The creation of women's voice, or a feminist standpoint, or a gynocentric theory, entails diving into a world divided between male and female experience in order to critique the power of the former and valorize the alternative residing in the latter. It is a theoretical project that opposes the identities and coherencies contained in patriarchal theory in the name of a different set of identities and coherencies, a different and better way of thinking and living. The deconstruction of gender entails stepping back from the opposition of male and female in order to loosen the hold of gender on life and meaning. This theoretical project renders gender more fragile, more tenuous, less salient as both an explanatory and an evaluative category. The creation of a women's point of view is done in order to reject the male ordering of the world; the deconstruction of gender is done in order to reject the dualism of male and female.' Efforts to give voice to a women's perspective sometimes emphasize the need to speak with and listen to women, and other times go on to call on women's perspective to provide direction for political change. In both approaches the arguments usually call for some founding source for women's experiences: sexuality and reproduction, the political economy of the gendered division of labor, the practices of mothering, the telos of nature, or divine inspiration. Sometimes the defining category [for women] is conceptualized biologically or innately, suggesting an essentialist form of argument in which the meaning of women's lives is lodged in the body or the psyche. Other times essentialism is eschewed in favor of a historical account in which "woman" or "women" is/are produced through and against the operation of political, economic, and social forces. Whether the arguments emphasize what women do or what women are, the construction of the category "women's experience" calls for some coherent notion of what sorts of persons and what sorts of experiences count as fundamental. Realizing that the foundation they seek may not apply to all women or exclude all men, expressions of women's voice usually call for respect for differences among women (and sometimes among men as well), but the logic of the search for a founding experience tends to elide difference nonetheless. The deconstructive project comes to the defense of difference, in opposition to "the founding of a hysterocentric to counter a phallic discourse."2 The deconstruction of gender is done in the name of a politics of difference, an antifoundationalism defending that which resists categorization, which refuses to be corralled in the categories of male and female. While nearly all feminist theory at some level opposes binary opposition, the deconstructivists are the most radical in their [it] call[s] for an opposition to sexual dualism itself in the name of "the multiplicity of sexually marked voices," or relationships that "would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes."3 Yet the deconstructive project is itself parasitical upon the claims it seeks to unfound, including claims about sexual difference, both those of the patriarchal order and those of feminists. So these two projects cannot be neatly separated. They are more like contrasting themes running through the fabric of feminist theory. Sometimes the two projects meet head on in debate, but more often they are both present within a particular flow of argument, encountering and evading one another in subterranean fashion. Advocates of each often speak as though they were totally separate and antagonistic endeavors, but within the general fabric of feminist thought they appear more often as connected, while contrasting, themes. While the relationship between them is not harmonious, nonetheless there are conversations possible between them. They are contrasting voices which create different, albeit related, possibilities for knowledge and politics.

Their silence on the unique differences that constitute trans life re-entrenches the cis-supremacist foundation and constitutes an erasure of trans life. This controls the root cause of patriarchy—it is precisely because we take gender stability for granted that its normalizing force is perpetuated, enabling the domination of women.

#### Sheperd and Sjoberg[[2]](#footnote-2)

Taking cisprivilege seriously draws attention to the fact that even the most inclusive interpretations of security exclude the ambiguous (Munoz, 1999: 2), the cross (McCloskey, 2000: xii; Roen, 2002), the invisible (Bettcher, 2007: 52), the disidentified (Heyes, 2003: 1096) and the 'in' (Shotwell and Sangray, 2009: 59). We argue here that this is neither incidental nor accidental, even if it is not a conscious practice of exclusion, and that these exclusionary practices are forms of violence. Foucault suggested that '[a] relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys or it closes off all possibilities' (1983: 340). Violence perverts, inverts or renders unintelligible certain ways of being in the world while endorsing others; in this, violence is perhaps best conceptualised as a specific relation of power that is not necessarily repressive but productive. A conceptualisation of violence inspired by Foucault can allow for the admission of 'the exclusionary presuppositions and foundations that shore up discursive practices insofar as those foreclose the heterogeneity, gender, class or race of the subject' (Hanssen, 2000: 215) as acts of violence that are simultaneously practices of power. On this view, violence is not reducible to (physical) constraint or repression but rather encompasses regulative idea(l)s and performs ordering functions in our collective cognitive frameworks. If we accept that representing transpeople and queer bodies specifically as in- and hypervisible in war stories and security strategy is a form of violence, and that this violence has its foundation in unexamined and often unconscious privilege enjoyed by cispeople, then we can begin to understand how a nuanced and sophisticated gendered theory of security needs to incorporate corporeality, including trans- corporeality. We can note parallels between transphobic violence (policing and actively (re)producing the boundaries of gender) and transnational violence (policing and actively (re)producing the boundaries of religions, states, ethnicities and/or alliances. Laura Shepherd (2008: 78; see also Shepherd, 2010c) terms these processes 'the violent reproduction of gender' and 'the violent reproduction of the international'). The borders of gender are policed as a part of an active policing of the borders between states, the borders between states and non-states, and the borders between the (safe) self-state and the (dangerous, terrorist) other. Narratives of the international fetishise and Orientalise the exotic 'Other' (be it a colonial other, a trans- other or a terrorist other) to associate Otherness with violence and inspire violence towards the Other. 'Non-violent' resisters of existing (cisgendered) social orders are often addressed by the dominant (gendered) social order violently, much like non-violent transpeople are often attacked for the very presentation of trans-ness in the face of a social order that excludes their existence both de jure and de facto . We suggest that these are ontopolitical practices; as Michael Dillon explains, 'all political interpretation is simultaneously ontopolitical because it cannot but disclose the ontology sequestered within it' (1999: 112). The ontopolitical (representational) practices of security have thus far been founded on embedded cisprivilege. The ontology of security, even of gendered security theory, has conventionally relied on gender/sex certainty and gender/sex hierarchy. If it is analytically and conceptually productive to see transphobic violence as the violent reproduction of a stable sex/gender system that 'naturally' privileges cisgender performances because such performances are associated with normality and safety and trans- performances are associated with danger and discomfort, it then becomes possible to ask questions about the ways that trans-in(/hyper)visibility, cisprivilege and a regulative, exclusionary ontopolitical social order are violently reproduced in inter/transnational relations. In tentative conclusion, we suggest that this might be a creative and constructive way forward that resists the dominant ontopolitical practices of security-as-matter and gender-as-binary, both of which bring into being a disguised and disfigured (corpo)reality of genderqueer and trans- bodies in/of war.

The alternative is to affirm gender self-determination – a collective praxis of becoming that locates freedom beyond the constrictive frames of gender binaries.

#### Stanley[[3]](#footnote-3)

Gender self-determination is a collective praxis against the brutal pragmatism of the present, the liquidation of the past, and the austerity of the future. That is to say, it indexes a horizon of possibility already here, which struggles to make freedom flourish through a radical trans politics. Not only a defensive posture, it builds in the name of the undercommons a world beyond the world, lived as a dream of the good life.1 Within at least the US context, the normalizing force of mainstream trans politics, under the cover of equality, operates by consolidation and exile. Or put another way, through its fetishistic attachment to the law and its vicissitudes, mainstream trans politics [it] argues for inclusion in the same formations of death that have already claimed so many. This collusion can be seen in the lobbying for the addition of ‘‘gender identity’’ to federal hate crimes enhancements. While the quotidian violence many trans people face—in particular trans women of color—is the material of daily life, this push for the expansion of the prison-industrial complex through hate crimes legislation proliferates violence under the name of safety. Legislative and semilegislative apparatuses from the United Nations and NGOs to local governance have begun to include similar language around “gender equity.” Champions of such moves might cite the Yogyakarta Principles (2007), which are the findings of a human rights commission convened to foreground ‘‘Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity’’ globally, or such recent decisions as that of the Australian government to add a third gender option of ‘‘X’’ to their passports as signs of progress. However, an ethic of gender self-determination helps us to resist reading these biopolitical shifts as victories. Here the state and its interlocutors, including at times trans studies, work[s] to translate and in turn confine the excesses of gendered life into managed categories at the very moment of radical possibility.2 To begin with the ‘‘self’’ in the wake of neoliberalism might seem a dangerous place to turn a phrase, especially one that is suggested to offer such radical potentiality—and perhaps it is. After all, the ‘‘self ’’ in our contemporary moment points most easily toward the fiction of the fully possessed rights-bearing subject of Western modernity, the foil of the undercommons. However, here it is not the individual but a collective self, an ontological position always in relation to others and dialectically forged in otherness, that is animated. The negation of this collective self, as relational and nonmimetic, is the alibi for contemporary rights discourse, which argues that discrete legal judgments will necessarily produce progressive change. Rather than believe that this is an oversight of the state form, critics of human rights discourse remind us that this substitution is a precondition of the state’s continued power. Antagonistic to such practices of constriction and universality, gender self-determination is affectively connected to the practices and theories of self-determination embodied by various and ongoing anticolonial, Black Power, and antiprison movements. For Frantz Fanon and many others, the violence of colonialism and antiblackness are so totalizing that ontology itself collapses; thus the claiming of a self fractures the everydayness of colonial domination. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense echoed a similar perspective in their 1966 Ten Point Plan. Self-determination, for the Panthers and for many others, is the potentiality of what gets called freedom. Connecting these histories, ‘‘gender self-determination is queer liberation is prison abolition’’ was articulated by the gender and queer liberation caucus of CR10, Critical Resistance’s tenth anniversary conference in 2008 (The CR10 Publications Collective, 2008: 7). To center radical black, anticolonial, and prison abolitionist traditions is to already be inside trans politics.3 From STAR’s (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries) alliance with the Young Lords in New York City and the recent organizing against US drone attacks led by trans women in Sukkur, Pakistan, to Miss Major’s words that anoint this essay, these forms of gender self-determination, even if left unnamed, argue that national liberation and the overthrow of colonial and carceral rule must be grown together with gender liberation (see Littauer 2012). Gender self-determination opens up space for multiple embodiments and their expressions by collectivizing the struggle against both interpersonal and state violence. Further, it pushes us away from building a trans politics on the fulcrum of realness (gender normative, trans, or otherwise) while also responding to the different degrees of harm people are forced to inhabit. As a nonprescriptive politics, its contours cannot always be known in advance—it is made and remade in the process of its actualization, in the time of resistance and in the place of pleasure. Becoming, then, as Gilles Deleuze might have it—or more importantly, as Miss Major lives it (Stanley and Smith 2011)—is the moment of gender self-determination: becoming liberated as we speak.

The ballot should prioritize the most vulnerable—the Aff creates an illusion of protection that operates through the sacrifice of the most vulnerable and whitewashes complicity in transphobic structures.

#### Spade[[4]](#footnote-4)

Trans resistance is developing in a context of neoliberal politics where the choice to struggle for nothing more than [\*1109] incorporation in the neoliberal order is the most obvious option. We are continually invited to participate in building and growing the systems of control that shorten trans lives. The inclusion and recognition offered by these invitations is not just disappointingly symbolic, it also legitimates and expands conditions of subjection and harm. We can translate the pain of having community members murdered every month into a demand for more punishing power for the criminal system that targets us. We can fight to have the state declare us equal through anti-discrimination laws, yet watch as the majority of trans people remain unemployed, incapable of getting ID, kept out of social services and health care, and consigned to prisons that guarantee sexual assault and medical neglect. Structured abandonment and imprisonment remain the offers of neoliberalism for all but a few trans people, yet law reform strategies beckon us to join the neoliberal order. The paths to equality laid out by the "successful" lesbian and gay rights model to which we are assumed to aspire have little to offer us in terms of concrete change to our life chances, and our inclusion in that model legitimizes systems that harm us and further obscures the causes and consequences of that harm.The political and economic conditions we are experiencing both shorten trans lives and threaten to subsume trans resistance. Trans people are told by legal systems, state agencies, employers, schools, and our families that we [they] are impossible people who are not who we say we are, cannot exist, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere. We have been told by lesbian and gay rights organizations, as they continually opt to leave [them] us aside, that we are not politically viable and our lives are not a political possibility that can be conceived. At the same time, the norms of non-profit governance dictate that we must run our organizations like businesses, that more participatory or collective models of governance are inefficient and unfeasible, that we need to tailor our messages to what the media can understand, that our demands need to fit within the existing goals of the institutions on which we seek to intervene. The demands that are emerging from vulnerable trans communities for prison abolition, an end to immigration enforcement, full trans-inclusive health care, and economic justice are the kinds of demands that are incomprehensible to rights-claims-focused reform movements. These are demands that cannot be won in [\*1110] courts. These demands are emerging from those for whom narrow legal reform demands have little to offer. The perceived impossibility of the very lives of trans people, especially those who experience multiple vectors of subjection of which trans identity is only a part, and the perceived impossibility of the demands and methods of resistance emerging from those populations are symptomatic of the inherent conflicts and divides produced (and often hidden) by neoliberalism. Many activists and organizations are working to address conditions faced by trans and gender non-conforming people in ways that are part of a broad politics of racial and economic justice and that recognizes the central role of criminalization, immigration enforcement and poverty in trans subjection. This work prioritizes building leadership and membership on a "most vulnerable first" basis. At the same time that these projects are emerging, many are doing work to challenge the structures of LGBT rights frameworks and formations that are reproducing harmful conditions. Many are challenging the prioritization of and resource concentration in marriage reform work. Many are questioning the hate crimes law strategy as a way to address violence and opposing hate crimes laws "inclusion" campaigns. Organizations like the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and the Peter Cicchino Youth Project have challenged the lawyers-only, behind-closed-doors agenda setting and decisionmaking that has been typical of lesbian and gay rights and is being emulated in emerging transgender legal circles. n39 Additionally, around the US and the world, people are innovating models of mobilizing about trans politics that are deeply rooted in and connected to social movements for racial and gender justice, wealth redistribution, and opposition to imperialism. In a moment in which trans identity is called to become a location for reproducing the exile logic of neoliberal fervor for criminalization and the "equal opportunity" logic that legitimates market-based distribution of life chances, the fruitlessness of those developments for most trans people opens [\*1111] key strategy questions. The call to formal legal equality through hate crimes laws and employment-focused anti-discrimination laws beckons trans populations to claim and embrace a kind of recognition that not only fails to offer respite from the brutalities of poverty and criminalization but also lends our struggle to the "inclusiveness" framework that justifies and expands the structures that produce those conditions. We are invited to demand that trans people are "human" when "human" is still defined through norms of race, ability, and immigration status that actually limit the invitation to a very small part of the trans population. n40 A growing dissent from this politics of recognition and inclusion is articulating a trans politics that refuses the invitation and articulates demands that conflict with the abandonment and imprisonment regimes that neoliberalism centers. These other trans politics, that appear impossible, incomprehensible, unviable in the context of recognition and inclusion-focused non-profitized social movements, include a critical engagement with the infrastructure of social change. Rejecting elite strategies centering law reform and mainstream media messaging, these locations of resistance offer models of participatory mass-based struggle led by those working at the intersections of multiple vectors of subjection. Such politics is unrecognizable as "LGBT" politics in the current moment in which formal legal equality and single-issue framing have claimed this realm for an agenda that centers "family" and "law and order" in conservative terms. The existence of critical practices that resist the beckoning of recognition despite the enormous pressures of neoliberal framing and nonprofitization suggests the fierce desire for trans political practices that actually address trans survival. It is that space, where questions of survival and distribution are centered, where the well-being of the most vulnerable will not be compromised for a promise of legal or media recognition, and where the difficult work of building participatory, de-professionalized resistance is taken up, where we can seek the emergence of deeply transformative trans resistance.

1. Kathy E. Ferguson [Professor of Philosophy, University of Hawaii]. “Interpretation and Genealogy in Feminism” Signs. Vol. 16, No. 2. pp. 322-339. Winter 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shepherd and Sjoberg ’12 (Laura J. Shepherd is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of New South Wales, Australia, Laura Sjoberg is Assistant Professor of Political Science (with a courtesy affiliation in Women's Studies) at the University of Florida, “trans- bodies in/of war(s): cisprivilege and contemporary security strategy,” Feminist Review, suppl. conflict 101 (Jul 2012): 5-23) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eric Stanley, “Gender Self-Determination,” TSQ: Trans Studies Quarterly, Vol. 1-2, pp 89-92. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dean Spade [Assistant professor at Seattle University School of Law]. “KEYNOTE ADDRESS.” 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)