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or alternatively

# THIS (QUEER) WOMAN WHO IS NOT ONE, AND THE OTHER WHO IS

## Gender ontoformativity and experimental writing

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### Abstract

In this paper, I explore a foundational feminist contradiction, apparent when lesbianism becomes feminism's theory rather than its practice, and crucial for understanding femininity, the intransigence of gender, and feminist solidarity in the present. If a lesbian is 'the rage of all women' against the contempt in which women are held (Radicalesbians, [1971] 2000, 234), how can we understand radical lesbian feminists' continuing contempt for trans women (Raymond, 1979, 1994; Jeffreys, 1990; Stanley, 2000; Bettcher 2009, 2014)? Trans women 'provide key evidence about how gender categories are sustained', yet many radical lesbian feminists figure them as 'hostile outsiders' (Connell, 2012: 860). To explore this contradiction and consider its implications for the present, I turn to a 1977 text by radical lesbian feminist Nicole Brossard and a 2007 text by trans lesbian Trace Peterson to argue that what lesbians and trans women have in common is the condition of being 'spat summarily out of reality' (Frye, 1983: 173) and yet finding, astonishingly, that one's existence can be articulated. To make this argument, I focus, not on the problem of identity, but on the ontoformative character of gender. As an alternative to being 'attacked on the street for just existing' (Peterson, 2016), experimental writing offered Peterson the possibility of 'modelling potential realities that might be habitable' (2015b: 475). In Brossard's words, 'if patriarchy can take what exists and make it not, surely we can take what exists and make it be' (1988a: 103). In the words of trans feminist scholar Raewyn Connell, 'social practice continuously brings new social reality into being' (2012: 866). What radical lesbian theory from the 1970s shares with contemporary theorising by trans women is the insight that identifying with men is expected. It is in identifying with women that we are most at risk.

### Keywords

queer, woman, gender, ontoformativity, experimental writing, feminist, lesbianism, femininity, intransigence of gender, feminist solidarity.

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## INTRODUCTION: ON MAKING SENSE

If it weren't lesbian, this text would make no sense. [...] Crossing through the symbol while I am writing. An exercise in deconditioning that leads me to acknowledge my own legitimacy. The means by which every woman tries to exist: to be illegitimate no more.

- Nicole Brossard ([1977] 1983: 16)

Everyone is a little Trans  
 Everyone is a little Bisexual  
 Everyone is a little Genderqueer  
 Everyone is a little Not There [...]

Everyone is a little good at sex  
 Everyone is a little bad at gender [...]

Everyone is a precise floating ethereal ectoplasm except when it's time to pick up a paycheck or eat or have sex or clean the bathroom or get attacked on the street for just existing.

- Trace Peterson (2016)

FINAL AUTHOR VERSION

The intransigence, not the fluidity, of gender is central.

- Raewyn Connell (2012: 865)

We have so much in common, lesbians and trans<sup>2</sup> women. We walk through the world knowing that others may not see us as women, really. Indeed, we may not see ourselves that way, though we do not wish to be, and indeed may be at risk for being seen as, men. Some (lesbians) may perform aspects of masculinity, and enjoy the authority it, putatively, provides, while others who present as feminine worry they are passing as heterosexual. Some (trans women), having rejected the masculinity they were expected to perform, may be ridiculed for performing femininity, and yet have no way of being seen as women otherwise. As trans lesbian Trace Peterson writes, it's easy to imagine that everyone's gender 'floats' until it's time to 'pick up a paycheck or eat or have / sex or clean the bathroom or get

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<sup>2</sup> I have deliberately chosen not to use the neologism 'trans\*' in this paper. Since 2010, the word 'trans\*' has been used in place of transgender and trans 'to provide for more possibility' (Bettcher, 2014) in terms of gender identities because genderqueer people who don't identify as men or women may feel excluded from the category of 'trans'. But trans people may not self-identify as 'trans\*'. Indeed, Peterson does not self-identify as 'trans\*', so I have followed her lead and identified her as a 'trans lesbian', the adjective and noun she uses to describe herself.

attacked on the street for just existing' (2016). In this paper, I will argue that what 1970s radical lesbian theory has in common with contemporary theorising by trans women is the insight that identifying with men is expected. It is in identifying with women that we are most at risk. Having learned decades ago from Simone de Beauvoir that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1949),<sup>3</sup> acknowledging trans women's identities should be conceptually obvious for contemporary lesbian feminists. Yet it has not been. Instead, the desire of trans women to be acknowledged as women and as lesbians, to join feminist communities, and even to be treated with respect, has been met with hostility, disparagement, even disgust. This lack of solidarity just does not make sense.

### **THEORETICAL CONTEXT: ON BEING SPAT OUT OF REALITY**

When 1970s radical lesbian feminist theorist Monique Wittig famously asserted that lesbians are not women, the ground beneath the feet of liberal feminists began to shake. If it is incorrect to say that lesbians 'associate, make love, live with women' ([1980] 1992: 32), who do we desire and whose liberation do we seek? The implications of Wittig's assertion have been similarly challenged by the experience of contemporary trans women. If trans women are only visible as women when they perform femininity, how else can they be seen? As Marilyn Frye (1983) argues, 'when one is suspected of seeing women, one is spat summarily out of reality, through the cognitive gap and into the negative semantic space' (1983: 173). This continues to be the case, even when the woman one sees is, as she is for a trans woman, herself. Frye wrote, 'if you ask what became of such a woman, you may be told she became a lesbian, and if you try to find out what a lesbian is, you will be told there is no such thing. But there is' (1983: 173). Against the argument that there is no such thing as a lesbian (cis or trans), my focus is on her existence.

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<sup>3</sup> *'On ne naît pas femme : on le devient'* (de Beauvoir, 1949: 13).

*When lesbianism becomes feminism's theory*

Radicalesbians argued in 'The Woman-Identified Woman' ([1971] 2000) that a lesbian is 'the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complex and freer human being than her society – perhaps then, but certainly later – cares to allow her' ([1971] 2000: 233). As such, she is 'the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,' a rage against the contempt in which women are held (234). Rather than consider the ways trans women 'provide key evidence about how gender categories are sustained' -- why women continue to be held in contempt -- many radical lesbian feminists figure them as 'hostile outsiders' (Connell, 2012: 860). This foundational feminist contradiction becomes apparent when lesbianism becomes feminism's theory rather than its practice.<sup>4</sup> The title of Trace Peterson's introduction to *Troubling the Line*, the first anthology of transgender writing (Tolbert and Peterson, 2015: 15), is 'Being unreadable and being read'. Peterson's point is that, despite the inhospitable structure of the current gender order, it is possible to read what appears to be unreadable, to write what appears to be unliveable. It is possible, contemporarily, to see, and be, a trans woman and a trans lesbian, just as it was possible, in the 1970s, to see and be a cis lesbian. To explore this contradiction and consider its implications for the present, I turn to two texts of experimental writing that each explore transitions between locations on the gender order. Appearing thirty years apart, they enact uncannily similar engagements with the ontoformativity of gender.

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Ilana Eloit and Clare Hemmings, whose 2017 call for abstracts for a proposed special issue on the topic, 'Lesbian Theory, Feminist Politics: Transnational Perspectives', led me to think about my perspective as a lesbian who had been shaped intellectually by lesbian theory of the 1970s, did not come out until the early twenty-first century, and was repelled by the terrifying politics of the TERF wars. One of their questions in the call – 'what happens [...] when lesbianism becomes feminism's theory rather than its practice' – became my own and I am grateful for this crucial starting point.

### *Generating new forms of meaning*

As a legacy of modernism, experimental writing is marked by its resistance to interpretation and capacity to generate new forms of meaning. As we will see, Nicole Brossard's *These Our Mothers* ([1977] 1983) resists – both semantically and conceptually -- the category of heterosexual 'mother' and yet enacts Brossard's existence as a radical lesbian feminist who is also a mother. In uncannily similar terms, Trace Peterson speaks explicitly of the ontoformative process of writing *Since I Moved In* (2007) as she was moving toward transition from heterosexual man to trans lesbian. Peterson wrote *Since I Moved In* between 2000 and 2005 and published it in 2007, before she transitioned (Peterson email to Rudy, 23 March 2018). The act of writing, and the enactment of the writing in performance, enabled her to 'envision a hypothetical female version of myself' (Peterson 2015a: 476). Peterson describes herself contemporarily as 'more lesbian than bisexual, more trans than queer, more queer than gay' (Peterson email to the author, September 18, 2018) and thus offers a striking example of a radical transition in the gender order in terms of both sex and desire. In what follows, I will argue that what lesbians and trans women have in common and can reveal about the experience of women generally is that one way to cope with the condition of being 'spat summarily out of reality' (Frye, 1983: 173) is to demonstrate that one's existence can nonetheless be articulated and therefore acknowledged.

### *The ontoformative character of gender*

To make this argument, I focus, not on the problem of identity, but on the dynamic and ontoformative character of gender. 'If the person is constructed 'as a "project" of realising oneself in a particular way', writes trans feminist scholar Raewyn Connell, that project is 'onto-formative', constitutive of social reality' (2012: 210). Individuals articulate their

existence in relation to the both the structure and dynamics of the apparent ‘reality’ we inherit when we are born into the ‘gender order’ of our historical moment (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2010, 2012). Radical lesbian feminist theorist Monique Wittig called the gender order she entered at birth ‘the straight mind’ (1980: 21). Yet the ‘human body itself is an object of practice’ that operates within and has effects on a structure of gender relations (Connell, 1987: 78); ‘social practice continuously brings new social reality into being’ (Connell, 2012: 866). Engaged in a dynamic process, ‘the results of practice do not sit around outside time, but themselves become the grounds of new practice’ (Connell, 1987: 79).

*Gender and language, or the ontoformativity of practice*

Like a language, gender is a dynamic set of relations into which we are born, ‘a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others’ (Saussure, 1916: 114). Our notion of what exists is based on a system of signs that is ‘purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not’ (Saussure, 1916: 117). As a ‘a process rather than a thing’ (Connell, 1987: 40), gender involves both the ‘historicity of the gender structure’ (the ‘repertoire available at a given time’) (Connell, 2012: 866) and what Martin (2003) calls ‘the event of enactment’ (Martin quoted in Connell, 2012: 866): the means by which the gender order is constituted and potentially transformed (Connell, 2012: 866). As such, gender is ‘ontoformative’ (Kosik, 1976; Connell 1987). Like language, gender always appears as a heritage of the preceding period (Saussure, 1916: 71). To exist in the present, we have no choice but to find ways of using the language we have inherited from the past to say what we mean. Like a language, the current gender order pre-exists and may not accommodate us and it may take us decades to realise much less speak this recognition. ‘The social is radically

unnatural' (Connell, 1987: 78), and in Wittig's words, the 'first, the permanent, and the final social contract is language' ([1981] 1992: 34). Yet gender, like language, is ontoformative: '[h]umans project themselves into their futures,' Connell argues, 'by the way they negate and transcend the circumstances that are given to them to start with' (Connell, 2012: 211).

### *Transition as a gender project*

In a 2012 essay on trans women and feminist thought, Raewyn Connell asks us to consider transition as a gender project. Trans women provide key evidence about 'how gender categories are sustained in everyday practices of speech, styles of interaction, and divisions of labour' (2012: 860). Moreover, trans women's brutal experience of the intransigence of gender provides evidence that gender is not simply performative (Connell 2012: 865).

Connell arrives at this insight through decades of research and personal experience. A trans woman herself, Raewyn Connell lived for decades as a heterosexual man and published widely under the name R.W. Connell. In 'A Transsexual Life Story, with Reflections on Change and History' (2010), written after she had transitioned, Raewyn Connell returns to a story which she had first heard in the 1980s while doing research on men's life histories for *Masculinities* (Connell, 1995). That story had been told to her by Robyn, a woman who had once been a man (Connell, 2010: 3). Connell writes, 'I am a transsexual woman too, but at the time was trying my best to live as a man. Faced with the same issues Robyn had faced, I made the opposite decisions' (2010: 4).

Robyn's reasons for wanting to tell her story were, Connell reports, political: 'I want people to realise that transsexuals are just normal people' (2010: 4). But Connell reports having been unable at the time, while living as a man, to tell her story: 'I couldn't think of a way to do so that wouldn't construct her as a "case"; and I didn't want to construct myself as an academic



expert on transsexuality' (2010: 4). Connell began transition 15 years later and by the first decade of the twenty-first century described 'cultural readings of transsexuality' as also having changed. Living now as a woman, she could tell Robyn's story, and her own.

## **BROSSARD AND PETERSON ENACT GENDER ONTOFORMATIVITY**

Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. (Wittig, [1989] 1992: 44)

Our focus in this section is on analyses of two texts: *These Our Mothers* ([1977] 1983), by lesbian feminist Nicole Brossard, and *Since I Moved In* (2007), by trans lesbian Trace Peterson. Written out of urban experiences in Montréal in the 1970s (for Brossard) and New York in the 2000s (for Peterson), these texts enact their ontoformative shifts through their experimentation with gender and language. For Brossard, the shift was from heterosexual to lesbian existence,<sup>5</sup> for Peterson, from cis man to trans lesbian.<sup>6</sup>

### **This (queer) woman who is not one: Nicole Brossard on lesbian existence**

Poet, essayist, and novelist Nicole Brossard is Quebec's best-known feminist writer and one of the most influential women of her generation (Rudy, 2005). Her story begins in the 1960s, when she began to publish poetry and married another poet. By 1974, her daughter had been born and she found herself in love with another woman (Rudy, 2005). Against the patriarchal construction of woman as heterosexual and patriarchal mother, and to enact her existence as a lesbian with an infant daughter, Brossard wrote *These Our Mothers* ([1977] 1983). As we shall see, Brossard enacts her transition in the gender order by 'crossing through the symbol [mother]', an exercise in 'deconditioning' that led her to acknowledge her own 'legitimacy'

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<sup>5</sup> Rudy (2005) describes Brossard's early life as follows: Brossard 'married Roger Soublière in 1966. [...] In 1974 her daughter Julie was born and she found herself in love with another teacher, a young woman named Germaine'.

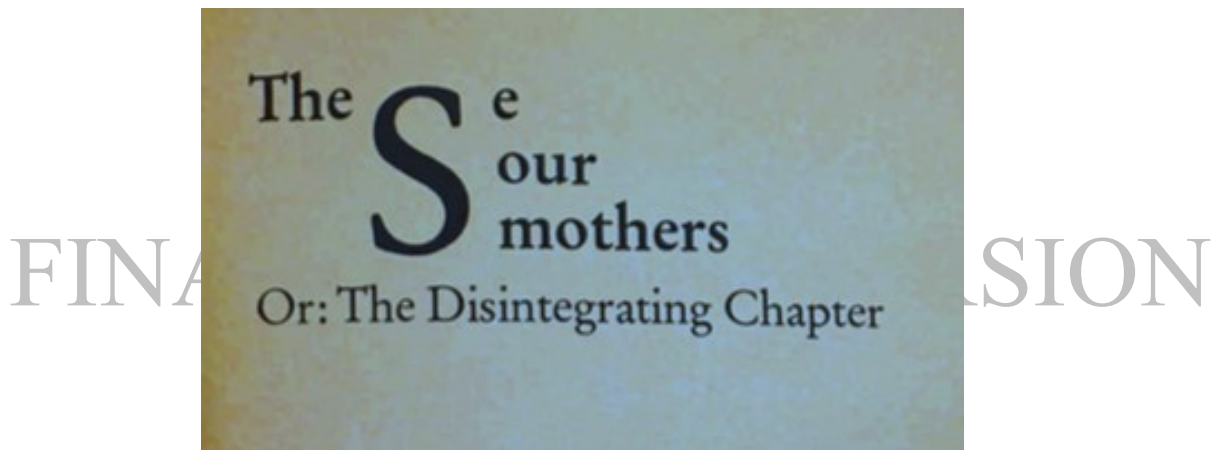
<sup>6</sup> For more detailed biographical information, see Trace Peterson's entry at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org) (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/trace-peterson>).

(Brossard, [1977] 1983: 16). Brossard's readers experience an exercise in 'deconditioning' when we grapple with Brossard's text. For example, the original title and translation are as follows.

*L'Amèr ou Le Chapitre Effrité, Théorie/Fiction (1977)*

*These Our Mothers, or The Distintegrating Chapter (1983)*

The semantic richness of this title is difficult to convey in linear prose. In a translator's preface, feminist theorist Barbara Godard speaks of making use of graphic modes to 'open up' for active 'readerly participation' the double meanings that are present in the original. The translation of *L'Amèr* thus appears as follows.



*L'Amèr*, this new word that sounds in French like 'the mother', has many meanings -- *These Our Mothers, The Sea Our Mother, The Smothers, The Sour Mother*. In offering the new word to readers, the possibility of new meanings emerge, and the received concept of 'the mother' begins to be dismantled. The ontoformative shifts in gender are enacted similarly spectacularly through Brossard's refusal of the rules of French grammar regarding gender agreement. As Godard notes, in several cases Brossard removes the 'e' from the end of a word (as in *laboratoire*) to mark the absence of the feminine in the activities carried out there ([1977] 1983: 7). At other times, the silent 'e' is removed, as in the title *L'amèr*: 'the silent 'e' is removed from *mère* (mother) to underline the process of articulating this silence, of moving toward a neutral grammar, which occurs in the text' ([1977] 1983: 7). These

strategies alone suggest the vehemence with which Brossard works to disrupt and reconstitute the ground of her being in language and gender.

*A ghost who gives her vision, which version?*

*These Our Mothers* opens with following epigraph, which names the combative situation Brossard finds herself in, writing as a lesbian: ‘It’s combat. The book. Fiction begins suspended mobile between words and the body’s likeness to this our devouring and devoured mother’ ([1977] 1983: 8). Brossard writes out of an awareness that her existence as a lesbian makes it impossible for her to exist among ‘patriarchal mothers’ ([1977] 1983: 18), who are ‘able only to initiate their daughters to a man’. ‘What happens to a woman,’ Brossard asks, ‘who recognises this process and encounters its inexorability in fact, in age and in history, in body’ (Brossard, 1983: 13)? She ‘kills the mother,’ Brossard writes, while ‘caressing the body of another woman over its entire living surface’; it is then that ‘the identical woman is born. A ghost who gives her vision, which version?’ ([1977] 1983: 23).

On the same day that she caresses the body of her lover, she washes the body of her daughter: ‘[c]yprine juices urine. Orgasm and labour as two sides of the same entity’ (Brossard, 1983: 18). At last, Brossard writes, ‘two generations of women have touched each other on the mouth and the sex and found their target’ ([1977] 1983: 14). Out of this she writes, so as not to ‘engulf and hurt your bodies and so as to find in them my void my centre’ (Brossard, 1983: 13). In the ‘void’ opened up through writing, she finds ‘her vision’ in an uncertain ‘version’ of a body. Instead of reproducing the mother-role of patriarchy, Brossard creates ‘her own locus of desire,’ finds ‘her own place at a distance’ ([1977] 1983: 18): ‘[s]he who is writing in the present between barbed wires remembers her past. Maybe they’ve been forced to cut *the current*. She goes through’ ([1977] 1983: 18). In the process of writing the text, and

for her readers, Brossard enacts this double movement of naming the conditions of her existence and recognising the reasons for gender's intransigence. As such, writing becomes 'An exercise in deconditioning' that leads her to acknowledge her own 'legitimacy' (Brossard, 1983: 16). By using and '[c]rossing through the symbol' ([1977] 1983: 16), Brossard both acknowledges the apparent intransigence of gender and enacts change in the current gender order.

### *Figure*

Brossard thus enacts a new symbol, a 'figure' that is both real and unrecognisable: the 'figure is real like a political intent to subject her to the plural before our eyes, or, singularly, to power. [...] Now the figure is in motion. At full speed the figure is unrecognisable. Intense unreadable. Sequence. The figure is migratory' ([1977] 1983: 61). The lesbian, in the work of 1970s feminist theorists and activists, is closer to what we now call queer: mobile, indeterminate, one who subverts and lives against and across social identities (Hesford, 2005: 239), like trans women today. Because trans lesbians return us to the fraught question of the body's relation to desire as well as gender, who one *wants* to be as well as to whom one is attracted, they offer 'striking examples of processes that [affect] all women's lives' (Connell 2012: 86). In the words of Andrea Long Chu, 'transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire. This would require understanding transness as a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*.'

### **Trace Peterson: This (queer) woman who is**

Poet and critic Trace Peterson is the founding editor and publisher of EOAGH, which has won two Lambda Literary Awards, including the first in transgender poetry. She is also co-editor of the anthology *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*

(2013, 2015). In 2018, Chax Press will publish a second edition of Peterson's *Since I Moved In*.<sup>7</sup> In an email message, Trace tells me she is pleased: through this enactment, her name will finally be publicly attached to her work. The first edition of *Since I Moved In*, published in 2007, was written before she had transitioned and appeared under her deadname, Tim Peterson. In this example, literary history provides evidence of both the ontoformativity of practice and the cost of living in the current gender order. Beyond its status as an historical document in Peterson's archive, *Since I Moved In* (2007) is an exemplary text for examining the conditions of existence of one who desires but has not yet moved into transition. Its literary history also documents the fact that social change can and does occur.

### *Trans Figures*

In 'Trans Figures', the first section of *Since I Moved In* (2007), Peterson articulates the conundrum of not identifying with the body or the desires into which she was assumed to have been born, and which was incorrectly read as male and straight. Consider this poem, 'The voice wants to turn itself into a body':

It can't, though it tries hard –  
it brings you flowers, to engender a meaningful  
relationship. It makes you coffee in the morning.  
Here, have a cup.  
See? It likes you. (11)

In naming the limitations of gender and of language, the poem nonetheless, through language, achieves a transfiguration. Asked to 'see?' we (with her) begin to see that it likes us. This is the voice of a lover who likes women. The next poem in this section is about the wish that language, in bringing the voice into being, might engender embodiment:

Let there be breasts! (and there were breasts)

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<sup>7</sup> Speaking of her transition, Peterson refers to her poetics statement, which appears in the first anthology of trans poetry: *Troubling the Line*, co-edited with T.C. Tolbert. 'When *Troubling the Line* was published in 2013,' she writes, 'it was under the name Tim Trace Peterson, then I transitioned in 2014, then the anthology *Troubling the Line* was revised in 2015 to update all the people in it whose names had changed. Chax Press is planning a second edition of *Since I Moved In* for this coming year [2018].'

Let there be a penis! (and there was a penis)  
 or at least it looked like it from the viewer's perspective,  
 under those clothes. [...]  
 The people looked around  
 and saw the abundances that language had given them.  
 The voice envied them. It could have none of this  
 to keep, but wanted you to think it did. (Peterson, 2007: 12)

As Brossard does, Peterson examines the conundrum of not identifying with the given symbol – the name that is not hers – and claiming the ‘trace’ of the woman she has been and is becoming: this (queer) woman who has since moved in.

*A Real Room / 'Toom': The body as transitional space*

The titular poem in the collection, ‘Since I Moved In’, begins thus:

starting to feel like a real room  
 or would you say that's traditional  
 almost typed ‘toom’ then corrected it. (Peterson, 2007: 26)

For the reader too, the ‘I’ moving in can be recognised as the ‘I’ of a woman moving into the body and desire erroneously read as male and straight. The body, like the poem, is a transitional and erotic space. The ‘real room,’ the body within which she lives, has become a ‘toom’ – a deadspace. Yet the voice of the woman is repeatedly ‘onstage’ with ‘him’, in passages like this.

This character has walked onstage now—  
 now, and she feels that she has known him  
 all her life, that she could almost tell him  
 her most secret thoughts, because of how he cries;  
 in front of all these people, for no reason  
 he cries. And she believes him, so she cries?  
 (Peterson, 2007: 35)

Or this: -- ‘I’m writing in my pajamas / the interface that has kept me from reaching you’ (Peterson, 2007: 26). Language, as that interface that connects and keeps us apart, that provides a world and traps us in it, is figured as our only hope and refuge, a transitional space, not only for the writer, but for her readers too. Peterson’s work enabled the coming out

process – she wrote the book as ~~Tim~~, read from it as Trace during public performances, and transitioned several years after it was published – and is thus a literal enactment of her coming to existence as a trans lesbian, and the world recognising her as such.

### **Implications: On making common cause**

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. (Lorde, [1979] 2007) 110)

By our very existence, lesbians and trans women threaten 'reality', 'the straight mind', the current gender order. In both cases, the (queer) woman in question, knowing who she is, how she sees herself, who she wants and who she wants to be, faces disavowal and an assertion of difference. Her life's work involves repeatedly asserting, simply, but profoundly, that she exists. My own narrative of transition between locations on the gender order is of relevance to my argument. Although I identify as lesbian now, I lived much of my adult life in a long-term heterosexual relationship. I was born in the 1960s, married and had two daughters in the 1980s, encountered feminist poststructuralist theory in the 1990s, and came out as lesbian in the 2000s. Given the conditions of my existence, theories of gender performativity did not give me a way to understand the heterosexual life I found myself in. much less how to transition out of it. I was an apparently-heterosexual woman, yet I felt like a lesbian. How had that happened? It was in experimental writing by lesbians that I found space to breathe, move, rest. My experience of lesbian existence taught me to recognise that gender's apparent intransigence is as important to acknowledge as its performativity. 'While it's impossible to thoroughly be a woman,' as the poet and theorist *Denise Riley* noted in her foundational investigation of the concept of woman, 'it's also impossible never to be one' (1988: 144).

In Teresa de Lauretis' 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation' (1988) and 'When Lesbians Were Not Women' (2001), she argues that while the condition of possibility of lesbian representation depends on a gendered sexuality, earlier generations of lesbian writers and artists nonetheless sought to escape gender (1988: 53). 'The female-gendered subject' was considered at once inside and outside the 'technologies of gender' (1988: ix). By the early 2000s much had, in her view, changed:

There was a time, in discontinuous space—a space dispersed across the continents—when lesbians were not women. I don't mean to say that now lesbians are women, although a few do think of themselves that way, while others say they are butch or femme; many prefer to call themselves queer or transgender; and others identify with female masculinity—there are lots of self-naming options for lesbians today. But during that time, what lesbians were was that one thing: not women. And it all seemed so clear, at that time. (de Lauretis, 2001: 72)

What seems clear today is that lesbians and trans women can write themselves into worlds, languages and social orders that deny their – our -- existence. As my comparison of texts by cis and trans lesbians reveals, this is 'where we are now' (de Lauretis, 2007: 67). Citing Marilyn Frye from 1983, de Lauretis reminds us: '[i]f the lesbian sees the woman, the woman may see the lesbian seeing her. With this, there is a flowering of possibilities. The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she *can be* seen; she may also be able to know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception' (Frye, 1983: 172; qtd. in de Lauretis, 2007: 67).

Crucially, only the women's movement has ever provided the conditions of possibility for the production of such texts 'written by women exclusively for women' (de Lauretis 2007: 60). These 'lesbian texts' which are, in Adrienne Rich's words, 'disloyal to civilisation', provide what we are seeking here, a view of the world as perceived by lesbians, a lesbian perspective which is, in a contemporary context, a queer and trans perspective: 'there are lots of self-naming options for lesbians today' (de Lauretis, 2001: 72). What radical lesbian feminist



theory from the 1970s has in common with contemporary theorising by trans women, is the insight that identifying with women brings the most risk. In Nicole Brossard's words, 'To write *I am a woman* is full of consequences' ([1988] 2005: 101).

### **CLOSING THOUGHTS: ON FEMINIST SOLIDARITY NOW**

I heard Nicole Brossard speak the words quoted above in 1988, in a keynote address to a feminist conference on writing and language in Dubrovnik. Thirty years have passed. Society has become even more conservative. Folks who should be allies are antagonists. Writing '*I am a woman*' is still full of consequences. Yet lesbians and trans women, cis and trans lesbians, often lack, not just solidarity, but even mutual empathy. The ontoformative character of gender offers a way to understand both our histories and ourselves in the present, which we need to continue to do. Research on women continues to mean, as Christine Delphy noted in 2016, carrying out research on women's oppression. Following the UK première of *Je ne suis pas féministe, mais*, a documentary about her life and work, Delphy had this to say<sup>8</sup> about women's oppression today.

In the case of the hijab, it has become quite normal to say that they are wearing a sign of oppression. Of course, they never think about looking at themselves and wondering whether they are wearing or not very visible signs of oppression. At least in my mind, we are all wearing signs of oppression. You do not even have to wear a sign of oppression. You are a sign of oppression [audience laughs].  
(Delphy, in Delphy, Eloit, Hemmings, Tissot, 2016: 153)

Because women are still seen as signs of oppression, despite women's lived experiences to the contrary, what feminist politics needs in the present is a way to claim solidarity amongst all who identify with us. The issue is not, in Heyes' words, 'who is or is not really whatever' but 'who can be counted on when they come for any one of us: the solid ground is not identity but loyalty and solidarity' (2003: 1117).

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<sup>8</sup> Her comments were part of a conversation with filmmaker Sylvie Tissot and appear, in an edited transcript of the conversation, in *Feminist Review* (2017).

Brossard and Peterson provide vital information about the consciousness that develops when one shifts one's place in the gender order. In the 1960s, Nicole Brossard was assumed to be a married heterosexual woman. By 1974, she was both a new mother and a lesbian. She describes the experience as follows: '[s]uddenly, I was living the most common experience in a woman's life, which is motherhood, and at the same time I was living the most marginal experience in a woman's life, which is lesbianism. [...] Motherhood shaped my solidarity with women and gave me a feminist consciousness as lesbianism opened mental space to explore' (Brossard, 1990: 77-78). Trace Peterson speaks similarly of the solidarity with women and feminist consciousness that developed through the transition process.

Since transition I have had the experience of waking up to the existence of misogyny on a visceral level. The person I was as a man sometimes didn't take women as seriously as he should have when they talked about the presence of this force in their lives. Now I can see that misogyny is not only real but central to how structures of power in literature and society operate. (Peterson, 2015b: 476-477)

Experimental writing by lesbians and trans women both acknowledges the brute intransigence of gender and enacts ontoformativity and is therefore politically salient. It shows us where we are *not*, that is, in a world where it is simple to say who we are, what we want, that we exist, and can be heard. The gender order continues to be vigorously policed and yet in small pockets of community and resistance, some do, in Brossard's words, go through ([1977] 1983: 18). It is a powerful act to name our existence. In recognising the common ground in these enactments that recognise the present but insist on a different future, we can imagine, and sometimes even experience, a much-needed politics of solidarity.

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