

Towle, Evan B., and Lynn M. Morgan. 2006. "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the 'Third Gender' Concept." In Stryker and Whittle, *Transgender Studies Reader*, 666–84.

Williams, Jonathan R. 2012. "Trans Cinema, Trans Viewers." PhD diss., University of Melbourne.

DOI 10.1215/23289252-2399686

Gender Self-Determination

ERIC A. STANLEY

I am Miss Major, none of this Ms. shit. I am not a liberated woman. I'm a transgender woman and I'm working on becoming liberated as we speak.

—Miss Major, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*

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 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 semilegislativ 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 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*.

Eric A. Stanley is a President's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Departments of Communication and Critical Gender Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Eric is an editor of *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (2011) and has published articles in *Social Text*, *Women and Performance*, and *American Quarterly*.

Notes

1. I am here using Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept of the "undercommons" to point toward the commons as relation and nonplace. For more, see Moten and Harney 2004.
2. For more on the category of work of the state, see Dean Spade 2011.
3. This is a point that Che Gossett (2014) helps us collectively remember.

References

- Black Panther Party for Self Defense. 1966. "The Ten Point Plan." www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm (accessed January 7, 2014).
- The CR10 Publications Collective, ed. 2008 *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK.
- Gossett, Che. 2014. "We Will Not Rest in Peace: AIDS Activism, Black Radicalism, Queer and/or Trans Resistance." In *Queer Necropolitics*, ed. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco. London: Routledge.
- Littauer, Dan. 2012. "LGBT Global News 24–7." *Gay Star News*, August 2. www.gaystarnews.com/article/pakistan-trans-activists-protest-against-us-drone-strikes020812.
- Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. 2004. "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses." *Social Text* 22, no. 2: 79.
- Spade, Dean. 2011. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End.
- Stanley, Eric A., and Nat Smith, eds. 2011. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK.
- Yogyakarta Principles. 2007. *The Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.pdf (accessed November 1, 2013).