Ideal Theory, Literary Theory: Whither Transfeminism?

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Abstract

In 2005, Charles Mills published “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology” in *Hypatia*: a withering critique of much of contemporary political philosophy and ethics. For Mills such work in philosophy failed to attend to the realities of social life and politics, and in remaining silent on actual issues of domination and oppression served an ideological role in supporting the interests of white bourgeois men.

Around the time that Charles Mills launched his broadside against ideal theory, trans theorists had been fighting their own battle against the abstraction of theory from the realities of trans lives and oppression. Vivian Namaste (2000) and Jay Prosser (1998) argued that contemporary gender theory failed to justice to the actuality of trans life, retreating instead to understanding trans life through literary archetypes and idealized radical figures.

In this chapter I’ll compare Mills’ critique of ideal theory with the transfeminist critique of 1990s gender theory, arguing that they share much in common. Centrally, both critiques share an underlying commitment to theory needing to be grounded in the actuality of oppression and power relations. This common thread, I suggest, must continue to guide transfeminist thought and action: *contra* Marquis Bey (2022) transfeminist thought and praxis must continue to be *about* trans lives, *about* the oppression of trans women, and *about* ways of actually achieving liberation from our current dire position.

Introduction

In 2005, Charles Mills published “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology” in Hypatia: a withering critique of much of contemporary political philosophy and ethics. For Mills such work in philosophy failed to attend to the realities of social life and politics, and in remaining silent on actual issues of domination and oppression served an ideological role in supporting the interests of white bourgeois men.

Around the time that Charles Mills launched his broadside against ideal theory, trans theorists had been fighting their own battle against the abstraction of theory from the realities of trans lives and oppression. Vivian Namaste (2000) and Jay Prosser (1998) argued that gender theory in the 1990s, whether in its queer theory or cultural feminist form, failed to justice to the actuality of trans life. Instead, such theory retreated to understanding trans life through literary archetypes and idealized radical figures.

In this chapter I’ll compare Mills’ critique of ideal theory with the transfeminist critique of 1990s gender theory, arguing that they share much in common. Centrally, both critiques share an underlying commitment to theory needing to be grounded in the actuality of oppression and power relations. This common thread, I suggest, must continue to guide transfeminist thought and action: *contra* Marquis Bey (2022) transfeminist thought and praxis must continue to be about trans lives, about the oppression of trans women, and about ways of actually achieving liberation from our current dire position.

Mills on Ideal Theory

Mills’ critique points to several failings of ideal theory in ethics and political philosophy, and as we’ll see, Prosser and Namaste charged 1990s gender theory 1990s with precisely the failings that Mills would note in his characterization and critique of ideal theory. The details of Mills’ conception of ideal theory is dealt with in more detail elsewhere in this volume (see…) but relevantly, Mills suggests that ideal theory variously features many of the following:

*Idealized Social Ontology*: “An idealized social ontology… will abstract *away* from relations of structural domination, exploitation, coercion, and oppression, which in reality, of course, will profoundly shape the ontology of those same individuals”

*Ideal Social Institutions*: “Fundamental social institutions such as the family, the economic structure, the legal system, will therefore be conceptualized in ideal-as-idealized-model terms, with little or no sense of how their actual workings may systematically disadvantage women, the poor, and racial minorities.”

*Idealized Capacities*: “The human agents as visualized in the theory will also often have completely unrealistic capacities attributed to them – unrealistic even for the privileged minority, let alone those subordinated in different ways, who would not have had an equal opportunity for their natural capacities to develop, and who would in fact typically be disabled in crucial respects.”

*Strict Compliance*: “some theorists, such as, famously, John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, also endorse "ideal theory" in the sense of "strict compliance as opposed to partial compliance theory": the examination of "the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society. Everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions."”

*Silence on Oppression*:“Almost by definition, it follows from the focus of ideal theory that little or nothing will be said on actual historic oppression and its legacy in the present, or current ongoing oppression”

*Idealized Cognitive Sphere*: “the consequences of oppression for the social cognition of these agents, both the advantaged and the disadvantaged, will typically not be recognized, let alone theorized… little or no attention is paid to the distinctive role of hegemonic ideologies and group-specific experience in distorting our perceptions and conceptions of the social order.” (Mills 2017 75-76)

Each of these features of ideal theory serves to obscure the actual functionings of society, especially the realities of ongoing oppression. As Mills famously remarks, “*How in God’s name could anyone think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics?*” (Mills 2017 77) Such ideal theory, whether the theorist recognizes it or not, also serves an ideological function, serving the interests of the powerful. In what follows, we’ll explore how 1990s gender theory functioned as ideal theory in all of the ways that Mills described, and how ideal theory conceptions of transness were recruited into the ideological legitimation of both cultural feminist movements and queer movements, without much care for the trans people supposedly represented in such theory.

The 90s Trans Debate

By the 1990s, two strands of thinking about trans people had come to dominate debates about transness in the academy and broader activist circles. On the one hand, we had a strand of thinking that drew on cultural feminist arguments from as far back as the early 1970s which argued that trans women were inherently reactionary, either dupes or active agents of patriarchy.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the other, we had a strand of thinking drawn from the newly emerging field of queer theory, which claimed trans people were inherently radical, undermining and disrupting extant gender ideology.

The cultural feminist tradition under scrutiny from Prosser and Namaste finds its central figure in Janice Raymond, though Bernice L. Hausman, Dwight Billings and Thomas Urban are also corralled in its defence. The Raymondian understanding of transness is that of the conspiracy theorist: trans women are conceived of as either willing plotters against women or hapless dupes of patriarchal big pharma. The surgically and chemically warped men who call themselves women are, for Raymond, fetishizing a stereotypical model of womanhood, at once offering a cruel parody of women, and reinforcing stereotypes of femininity (Raymond 1994). Trans women, then, are agents of the patriarchy, reactionaries who are deeply committed to the patriarchal gender order who fetishize the female body parts that they acquire (Raymond 1994 29-31).

The queer theory tradition critiqued by Prosser and Namaste is centred around a few thinkers, not least Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jack Halberstam, and the uptake that their theorisations of transness got throughout the 1990s.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such thinkers (at least on their most popular readings) developed theorisations of transness as radical identities, which undermine any claims that one might make to the ‘naturalness of gender’, and inherent disrupt the extant gender system. Quoting Halberstam, Prosser writes that in this tradition,

“the transsexual is the apogee of postmodern identity, transition illustrating that the sex/gender system is a fiction: “We are all transsexuals except that the referent becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer). We are all cross-dressers, but where are we crossing from or to what? There is no ‘other’ side, no ‘opposite’ sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don’t… There are no transsexuals.” We are all transsexuals, and there are no transsexuals. Transsexuals ‘r’ us, full of postmodern liberatory promise, their very constructedness encapsulating the essential inessentiality, what we take for granted as the unnaturalness of the body.” (Prosser 1998 14, Halberstam 1994 212).

The general thought that this tradition expresses is that existing society embodies a rigid gender structure or set of norms, where it is assumed that the gendered behavior, roles, and so on, fall ‘naturally’ out of the sex that one is. In this ‘heterosexual matrix’ (to borrow Monique Wittig’s term) those born with a penis are, of nature, fit to fill male gender roles, and to be sexually attracted to women, who in turn, are those born with vaginas and who naturally fulfill womanly social roles and are sexually attracted to men. Rather than contingent social constructions, the heterosexual matrix of our cisheteropatriarchal society insists that gender roles are the expression of the underlying truth of one’s identity: one’s natural sexed biology.

Set against this heterosexual matrix, the queer theorist of this traditional stripe sees the figure of the trans person as a radical political actor. In being someone who troubles the supposedly natural and necessary link between sex and gender role, the figure of transgender radically undermines a central ideological tenet of cisheteropatriarchy. Meanwhile, in pursuing surgery and hormonal treatments to alter their bodies, the trans person on this account demonstrates the constructedness of sex. Rather than being natural, sex is a social construct after all, as demonstrated by the gender radical trans person. Trans people on this sort of account are equated with a political radicalism: inherently subversive and destabilizing of identity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We see then, that mainstream theories of transness in the 1990s seemed to offer a dichotomy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Either trans people are conservative enforcers of the patriarchal status quo, reinscribing cartoonish stereotypes of womanhood and manhood, or trans people are gender radicals undermining the very foundations of gendered society as postmodern radicals who demonstrate the constructedness of gender and sex.[[5]](#footnote-5) Either way, all trans people are radical political actors: radical reactionaries or radical progressives, recruited to serve in the ideological defence of different political movements.

Prosser and Namaste

As the 1990s drew to a close, Jay Prosser and Vivian Namaste made a pair of interventions into trans studies that radically shifted the field, leading to a general recognition that trans thought could not be reduced to feminist or queer theory. Whilst each made their critique slightly differently, I’ll discuss them together. Not only are *Invisible Lives*, and *Second Skins* remarkably similar books in spirit, at least in the sections I am interested in, both contain a key move: critique of the 90s trans debates as ideal theory.

At the centre of both Namaste and Prosser’s critiques is a basic commitment to the claim that trans people are just that: people. We aren’t special, and we’re just trying to get by in a world that is consistently hostile to us. We make choices under conditions that are unfavorable to us, making pragmatic compromises and difficult decisions. Take, for instance, the context of the clinic, where trans people seek out (often lifesaving) healthcare. Our actions here don’t reveal our authentic nature, whether conservative or radical. Rather, it is the context in which trans people act in the ways that they need in order to have the best chance of accessing the hormones or surgery that will make their lives easier. This sometimes means ‘playing to type’: if a doctor has a narrow conception of manhood, and will only prescribe to those trans men that meet his narrow conception, then the trans man wishing to convince the doctor that they should have access to hormones is often well-advised to butch it up. This doesn’t mean that trans men thereby reify manhood, or reinforce harmful understandings of masculinity. Nor does it mean that they radically disrupt hegemonic masculinity and thereby dismantle cissexist patriarchy. No: trans people are just making pragmatic and reasonable choices that allow them to get by under conditions of oppression, and this should be reflected in our theories. As Prosser remarks,

“I contend that we must make changes to our theoretical paradigms if we are to make room for the materiality of transsexual narratives” (Prosser 1998 5).

This focus on the material realities of trans life over and above an abstract theory of transness is summed up well by Namaste in her introduction to *Invisible Lives*, where she writes,

“I begin with the assumption that academics must first concentrate their energies on collecting information about how TS/TG individuals are located in the world. The reason for this is simple: to date, very few of the monographs, articles, and books written about us deal with the nitty-gritty realities of our lives, our bodies, and our experience of the everyday world... our lives and our bodies are made up of more than gender and identity, more than a theory that justifies our very existence, more than mere performance, more than the interesting remark that we expose how gender works. Our lives and our bodies are much more complicated, and much less glamorous than all that” (Namaste 2000 1).

Now, Namaste and Prosser differ on their methods for collecting information about trans people – the former more often works with sociological methods, the latter with the study of autobiography and self-portraiture by trans people. However both are fundamentally engaged with the realities of trans life, listening to trans people speak about their own lives, and beginning theory from the perspective of trans people themselves.

This methodological approach, beginning from trans existence, immediately gives us one way of calling into question certain theorisations of transness in the queer theory tradition. According to Namaste, part of the issue is that such theorisations come from a tradition of scholarship that is primarily concerned with literary representation of trans people mostly by non-trans people. That is, queer theory comes from an American tradition in the humanities, particularly English literature, film studies, and comparative literature. This, remarks Namaste, leads to a narrow scope of analysis, focusing myopically on “novels, films, plays, drag performances, and other sites of cultural representation” (Namaste 2000 20). Whilst these are hardly separate from the actual lives of trans people (trans people of course read and write plays, perform drag and so on) it would seem wrongheaded to base ones analysis of trans people *solely* (or indeed even primarily) on how they are represented in such cultural objects. One is tempted to sum up this problem in the manner of Magritte: *Ceci n’est pas une transsexuelle*.

This worry about abstraction from the realities of trans life in the methods of queer theory *qua* literary theory is, in structure, a broadly nonideal theory critique. It takes queer theory to task for failing to attend to the reality of life for an oppressed group, instead abstracting away via a methodology that is centred on art objects. However, this parallel to Mills goes further. In what follows, I’ll show how Prosser and Namaste offered paradigm nonideal theory critiques aimed at *both* queer theory and cultural feminism in just the way that Mills would later describe.

Ideal Social Ontology and Institutions

One place to start here is Prosser and Namaste’s rejection extant theorisations of patriarchy and the heterosexual matrix. Prosser and Namaste’s critique is distinctly Millsian: they are critiquing the social ontology presupposed by cultural feminists and queer theorists as idealized.

First, think of the cultural feminist model of patriarchy as a rigid hierarchy, with men as essentially and universally engaged in a project of ensuring the continued oppression of women, and women as perpetual victims of this project of oppression. Rather than looking at the details of the ways in which patriarchal oppression functions in variegated and intersecting ways, we get a rather unsubtle model. In this structure, trans women come out as crude parodies of womanhood and antifeminist infiltrators to be mandated out of existence, and trans men are vulnerable girls, gullible victims who need to be protected from a hoax perpetuated by patriarchal big pharma. Such a model of social reality is of course not merely deeply insulting to trans people, but also wildly *inaccurate* to trans peoples’ lives, to the complexities of trans people, and to the oppression we face.

Meanwhile, queer theory models the heterosexual matrix in a completely abstract manner, such that by the mere virtue of their symbolic rejection of that matrix in transition, trans people are treated as intrinsically radical political figures who demonstrate the nonliteralness of gender and sex, which were always really a fiction. This of course misses how real gender and sex are for trans people:

“If, for queer theory, transition is to be explored in terms of its deconstructive effects on body and identity… I read transsexual narratives to consider how transition may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity. In transsexual accounts transition does not shift the subject away from the embodiment of sexual difference but more fully into it.” (Prosser 1998 6).

As Namaste puts it, “The presentation of transgendered issues within queer theory does not account for the quotidian living conditions of transgendered people… queer theory begins its analysis with little thought of the individuals designated as its objects of study” (Namaste 2000 16). Instead of dealing with actual trans people, we get the ‘figure of transgender’ – an idealized type, who at once supposedly represents all trans people and yet is completely alien from any actual trans people: “a social context in which transsexual and transgendered people are reduced to the merely figural: rhetorical tropes and discursive levers” (Namaste 2000 51-52). The ‘figure of transgender’ for Prosser and Namaste is a distinctively late 20th century abstraction, which idealizes the position of transgender away from the concrete reality of actual trans people.

Idealised Capacities

Prosser and Namaste don’t see their interlocuters as straightforwardly attributing idealized capacities to trans people in the sense that Mills develops. Rather than being attributed (say) idealized rationality, trans people (if anything) are voided of capacities or agency of their own in cultural feminist understandings of the figure of transgender. For cultural feminists, most trans people are the ‘dupes’ of gender, manipulated by (variously) patriarchy, the medico-industrial complex, and manipulative men. As such, trans people lack any agency, or indeed the critical capacity to realise that they are being used. However, as a tool in the subordination of women, cultural feminists often attribute *huge* powers to trans people, especially trans women. The existence of trans women is, for such feminists one of the central tools in male domination, infiltrating and undermining feminist organizations, mocking women, and raping womens’ bodies via their very existence. Of course, this is to wildly overstate the political capacities of trans people. Even *if* trans people wanted to undermine feminism and support male domination, they lack the numbers, political influence, and material power to do so, to say nothing of the wild speculative metaphor of rape such feminists invoke. So here we have a critique of the cultural feminist as putting forward idealized *political* capacities.

Such claims of idealized political capacity have their mirror in the queer theorist’s overly optimistic claims about the radical power of trans people to overthrow heterosexist patriarchy. Certainly, trans people violate many of the norms of cisgender society by being trans. However, such norm violation is hardly enough to bring about the end of gendered society as we know it. It is quite compatible with continued heterosexist and patriarchal domination that some people flaunt the norms of society. Even when this sort of analysis is given an epistemic spin, such that the power of trans people as inherently disruptive comes in their *demonstration* of the contingency of gendered life, it is all too easy for the defenders of heterosexism and patriarchy to undermine this supposed revelatory power simply by marginalizing trans people as exceptions, or as ‘naturally trans’, such that the broad stability of the narratives of cissexism, heterosexism, and sexism are maintained. Queer theorists, then, have, much like the cultural feminists, idealized the political capacities of trans people.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Strict Compiance

We can also see a version of strict compliance critique in Prosser and Namaste’s remarks on queer theory. Namaste, for instance, draws approvingly on the following quote from Henry Rubin:

“Queer appropriations and the new movement among some transgenders to resignify themselves in a queer register carry an implicit critique of transsexuals who choose not to queer their identities. These more traditional transsexuals (is that an oxymoron?) choose to “play it straight” – to pass, to assimilate. They refuse the confessional strategy of coming out. Like most of the FTMs in my research, these transsexuals do not conceive of their life projects as gender fucking.” (Rubin 1998 276).

The thought here is something like this: the queer theory conceptualization of transness involves the idea that in being trans, the trans person is an inherently political radical creature, seeking to disrupt the heterosexual matrix. That is, *all* trans people are going to be on board with the overthrow of the extant gender system, and replacing it with a more radical future of gender fluidity. Yet as Rubin points out, when we go out and ask trans people what they want from their gendered lives, we find that whilst some are invested in a project of gender abolition or disruption, many just want to pass: to transition to a gender and then live as a paradigmatic member of that gender. Many trans women aren’t invested in a project of trying to undermine the foundations of womanhood, no, *they want to be treated as women*. Likewise, many trans men’s desires for manhood would be undermined were we to disrupt or do away with the category man. Rubin goes on: “As trans scholarship enters the doors of the academy via queer theory, a rift is developing between members of the trans community and this emerging scholarship.” (Rubin 1998 276).

Queer theory, (at least as construed by Prosser and Namaste) relies on the false assumption of strict compliance by trans people to the political strategy of gender disruption. Some trans people do see themselves as genderfucks and gender radicals, or as gender abolitionists (see Belinsky 2019, Cuboniks 2018, Cull forthcoming). But many do not. Many just want to be free to live as men and women without harassment and violence. Whilst Mills was largely concerned with models of the state which rely on strict compliance with (say) principles of justice for their stability. However, here we have a model of the social ontology of gender its outliers which relies on the strict compliance of outliers with a particular mode of politics for it to make sense.

Silence on Structures of Domination

What about the silence on structures of domination and oppression that Mills accuses ideal theory of committing? One would be hard pressed to claim that the likes of Raymond and Butler were silent on oppression – they were precisely concerned, in *The Transsexual Empire* and *Gender Trouble*, to bring to light and discuss gendered oppression, patriarchy, heterosexism, and so on. Fair enough: in this respect they are not ideal theorists. However, Prosser and Namaste point out that these theorists elided discussion of the particular ways in which *trans people* are oppressed, and the systems of domination that trans people face. In reducing trans people to dupes of the patriarchal order, or to radical agents who disrupt and challenge the heterosexual matrix, the theorist elides discussion of the oppression of trans people, and is silent on the very concrete violence that we face.

Think, for instance, of the bind faced by a trans woman who is worried about her treatment on her walk to work following harassment in previous journeys. No matter whether she thinks of herself as a stereotypical woman or as a gender radical, and regardless of whether either theory is a more apt description of her position in society, she is still going to have to worry about being shouted at in the street, assaulted, or sexually violated. No matter whether she upholds patriarchy or poses an existential challenge to the heterosexual matrix, she still has to worry about getting called a ‘tranny’ and groped in public.

Even when violence and harassment against trans people is discussed in these texts, it elides the specifically *transphobic* (and especially transmisogynistic) nature of the violence or harrassment involved.[[7]](#footnote-7) As Namaste writes of Butler’s discussion of the murder of Venus Extravaganza as depicted in the film *Paris is Burning*,[[8]](#footnote-8)

“Butler argues that Extravaganza enacts an imaginary relation to the category “woman” in order to escape the cruel realities of her class and ethnicity (Latina)… Butler writes that her death represents a “tragic misreading of the social map of power”. For Butler, Extravaganza does not escape her situation; rather she is treated as women are treated – especially women of color… In this interpretation, Butler elides both Extravaganza’s transsexual status and her work as a prostitute. Here is the point: Venus was killed because she was a transsexual prostitute… Since Butler has reduced Extravaganza’s transsexuality to allegory, she cannot conceptualize the specificity of violence with which transsexuals, especially transsexual prostitutes, are faced.” (Namaste 2000 13, Butler 1993 131).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Thinking through Prosser and Namaste’s work emphasises the necessity for fine-grained employment of Millsian critique: properly speaking, we should be open to the idea that theories may have both ideal and nonideal aspects. A social theory might provide quite a concrete, nonideal analysis of (say) race, whilst slipping into an ideal treatment of (say) disability. Even if we find the analysis of race in such a theory attractive, we should not hesitate to critique the proffered analysis of disability along Millsian lines.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Idealised Cognitive Sphere

Finally, we can also draw on Prosser and Namaste’s approach to argue that Butler assumes an idealized cognitive sphere, and in doing so, actually leaves an explanatory gap where a story about how transgender subjectivities should be. Think, for a moment, about how a gender identity (that is, the psychological sense of oneself as a member of this or that gender) is formed. Butler’s story, at least in *Gender Trouble*, is that people around a child repeatedly treat that child *as if* they are a member of a given gender, and subject them to norms appropriate to that gender. She writes, “the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures” (Butler 1999 3). This repeated treatment of a child *as if* they are (say) a girl, suggests Butler, creates in that child the impression that they are an authentic woman: a female gender identity.[[11]](#footnote-11) Treat someone like they are a woman enough, suggests Butler, and they really do begin to “feel like a natural woman” (Franklin 1969).

However, consider the typical experience of a trans woman. A trans woman will typically be raised as a boy, treated as if they are a boy, subjected to all the norms of boyhood and so on. Butler’s idealized vision of the cognitive sphere, whereby there is a frictionless relationship between external treatment and the internal development of a gender identity would suggest that this child would develop a male gender identity. However, in the case of many trans women, this just doesn’t occur. *Something* prevents the development of a male gender identity, and indeed *something* means that such trans women develop a female gender identity, despite always being treated as if they are boys and men. What is this *something*? Butler’s idealized cognitive sphere leaves us with no answer.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Towards a Materialism Transfeminism

The above points us away from ideal theory approaches to understanding trans people. Rather than relying on idealisations about trans people and they societies that they inhabit, one should look to the specifics of trans life, the contexts that they find themselves in, and the approaches that they take to navigate an often hostile world. However, the above considerations do not merely point to better ways to theorise about trans people. They also point to a transfeminist politics.

Remember the ways that both queer theorists and cultural feminists were critiqued for idealizing the political capacity of trans people. By virtue of existing whilst trans, trans people were positioned as inherently disruptive or oppressive, inherently able to overthrow or reinforce oppressive systems. Such views wildly overstated the political power that trans people have just in virtue of being trans people. This does not, of course, mean that trans people are completely powerless: not at all. However, political power requires more than merely existing as trans – it requires organization, movement building, and developing popular support. Trans people, by virtue of our low numbers and relative material dispossession, cannot rely solely on ourselves to make political change. We need to build a broad-base movement that builds alliances with other working-class and lumpen populations to resist transphobia, exploitation, racism and so on.

Of course, despite Namaste and Prosser offering powerful reasons to reject ideal theory in both its queer theory and cultural feminist forms, ideal theory continues to find support in some quarters. On the one hand, Raymond-inspired right-wing anti-trans movements have of course found a new life in the late 2010s and early 2020s. On the other hand, an unexpected revival of ideal theory in the queer theory mold has emerged from afropessimist thought in the work of Marquis Bey. I suggest that we must reject both of these forms of ideal theory, instead building a transfeminist movement led by trans people and grounded in the experiences and needs of trans people.

Certainly, we cannot just, as Bey has recently suggested in *Black Trans Feminism*, build a transfeminist movement on an abstract notion of transness, distinct from *being transgender* (Bey 2022 44). Bey seems to have entirely missed the critiques of Prosser and Namaste to return to a conception of transness as inherently radical. For Bey, transness is “primarily a *movement* away from an imposed starting point to an undisclosed (non)destination, [which] emblematizes abolitionist gender radicality: the fixedness and presumed immutability of bodily bestowal is dissolved through a departure toward something else” (Bey 2022 44). This is ideal theory *par excellence* – and we may rightly ask of Bey exactly where trans women, especially *Black* trans women fit into the vision of Black trans feminism being put forward. Bey at least has the self-awareness to declare that “black trans feminism is not *about* black trans women” (Bey 2022 32).

Not only does such theorizing fall victim to the critiques of ideal theory, such theorizing is also politically paralyzing.[[13]](#footnote-13) Instead of concrete calls to action and demands based in the lived realities and needs of trans people, we get a call for the abstract idea of ‘abolition’. Unlike those in the Black radical tradition whose call for abolition is a concrete set of demands (the defunding of the police, the end of incarceration and so on) based on the actual violence that Black people face (police brutality, mass incarceration and so on),[[14]](#footnote-14) in Bey’s revival of idealist queer theory a call for abolition is a call for the end to an abstract idea – the end to “logics of captivity” (Bey 2022 228), where such ‘logics’ seem defined primarily in terms of the use of categories (Bey 2022 72-77). *Even if* the use of categories is bad (though I submit it is not – see Cull 2019, Cull Forthcoming) I suggest that our political movements ought probably to focus on abolishing the actual prisons, not the metaphorical ones.

Conclusion

As I have argued, the work of Prosser and Namaste offers us a model of trans studies grounded in nonideal theory. Such a mantle has been taken up in various ways, from the Namaste-like sociological work of the Centre for Applied Transgender Studies, to the rising strand of trans materialist thinking exemplified in Gleeson and O’Rourke’s *Transgender Marxism* (2021). Wherever trans studies and trans philosophy goes from here, I submit that we should not give up on their central insight that our work should begin from the realities our lives, the oppression that we face, and the brute fact of our existence.

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1. What about trans men, nonbinary people, and trans women who explicitly endorse feminism? Most opt to minimize the existence of trans men or patronisingly dismiss them as vulnerable girls duped by the media or their peers. Meanwhile trans women who explicitly endorse a feminist politic are often understood as invading feminist spaces to sow division in the movement (Raymond 1994 104). Nonbinary people tend to be simply treated as delusional. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I’ll leave aside the question of how fair Prosser and Namaste’s characterisation of queer theory is. Certainly, it seems at times as if they acknowledge that the sort of view they are criticising might not be fairly characterised as (say) Butler’s personal views on the topic (see e.g., Prosser 1998 34). However, their characterisation of queer theory is accurate tohow the likes of Butler got taken up by the academy and wider society. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It’s certainly worth noting that since the end of the 1990s forms of queer theory that move away from ideal theory have been developed. Butler themselves has been remarkable in their receptiveness to critique and (along with the likes of Sara Ahmed) more recently developed queer theory in ways that attend much closer to the lived reality of trans and other oppressed people (see e.g., Butler 2004, Ahmed 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This potted history elides much for want of space, not least trans critiques of Raymond from the likes of Sandy Stone (Stone 1987), and work by the likes of Susan Stryker that has now become canonical in trans studies (Stryker 1994). However, what is especially remarkable about Namaste and Prosser is their sustained critique of *both* cultural feminist and queer theory traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Prosser sometimes talks about this in terms of a double bind of literalism:

“Since the body is conceived as a discursive effect, in terms of signification, the transsexual is read as either a literalization of discourse – in particular the discourse of gender and sexuality – or its deliteralization… When figured as literalizing gender and sexuality, the transsexual is condemned for reinscribing as referential the primary categories of ontology and the natural… Yet contrarily, contemporary theory has also located the transsexual on the other side of its literalism binary, reading him/her antithetically as deliteralizing the gendered body. If in the first mode of reading the transsexual is condemned for positing a sexed body before language, in the second mode the transsexual is celebrated for pushing sex as a linguistic signifier beyond the body… illustrating that the sex/gender system is a fiction.” (Prosser 1998 13-14).

The cultural feminist sees the trans person as reifying or literalizing a fiction of hyperfemininity in women, whilst the queer theorist sees the trans person as the ultimate demonstrator of the fiction of gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Moreover, Prosser sometimes accuses queer theorists of attributing a *radical voluntarism* to trans people regarding gender, such that we can choose our genders virtually at will – an idealised capacity that quite clearly runs contrary to the reality of the gendered subjectivity of trans people (see Prosser 1998 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Or worse it appears to be celebratory – see Daly 1991 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note the object of analysis is, once more, a cultural object. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This critique is mirrored in Prosser 1998 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An open question remains, however, of whether (in any given case like this) we should continue to find the nonideal aspect of the theory given its connection(s) to the ideal aspect of the theory. Of course, there might be cases in which the two aspects of the social theory are relatively disconnected, such that we can happily ‘hive-off’ the bit we like and leave out the bit we don’t like. However, it may be that the two aspect are closely tied such that the rejection of the ideal aspect of the theory entails rejecting the nonideal aspect too, or perhaps undermines our confidence in the analysis offered by the nonideal aspect of the theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I have analysed this process elsewhere as a ‘proleptic mechanism’ drawing on Bernard Williams’ and Miranda Fricker’s work on proleptic blame (see Cull 2020, Williams 1995 and Fricker 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I take it that Prosser’s answer to this question is that the something is “the recalcitrance of bodily matter” (Prosser 1998 17). That is, there’s some quick of trans people’s bodies and brains that (no doubt in conjunction with social and environmental features) leads to the development gender identities other than those that the social world attempts to impose. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The contrast between Bey and our nonideal theorists is starkest when Bey claims that trans people are impossible (Bey 2022 105). Compare Namaste: “[I begin] with the mundane assumption that TS/TG people exist, that we live – and die – in the world… I take it for granted that transsexual and transgendered people exist, and that we shall continue to do so even as the theoretical frameworks that explain our etiology, celebrate our transgression of a sex/gender binary, or condemn us to psychosis go in and out of style.” (Namaste 1998 55). We exist. We are possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Most famously of course Angela Davis, especially in Davis 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)