Laboratories of gender

Women's liberation and the transfeminist present

D-M Withers

In 2018, the Feminist Archive South received funding from the UK Government Equalities Office to run events in community locations across the South West. This programme enabled cross-generational engagements with inspiring histories of the recent feminist past.[1] Activities were open to self-identified women and non-binary people – a point that enraged so-called 'gender-critical feminists' who reject the idea that 'sex' can be subsumed by 'gender' while claiming it is fundamentally not possible to change the sex one is assigned at birth. Posie Parker – a proudly anti-trans agent provocateur who recently gained international notoriety[2] – attended one of the workshops run in partnership with TIGER (Teaching Individuals Gender Equality & Respect), a Bristol-based not-for-profit co-operative who work with schools and youth organisations to address gender inequality.[3] Parker signed up under a pseudonym and, when she arrived, shouted aggressively at the workshop facilitators, accusing them of being misogynists. She continued to interrogate those present throughout, and upon leaving, tore down creative work made by participants. That evening a video appeared on YouTube in which Parker recounted her version of events. Over 27 thousand people have now seen it, and an extensive comment thread reveals many people who find delight in her actions and perceive her hate speech as entertainment.

How do we make sense of such displays of anti-trans feeling, especially among those who self-describe as feminists? Transgender has occupied a fraught place within feminism since the 1970s, which is often expressed through anxious policing of the boundaries determining what and who women are. Yet transgender is woven in diverse ways into the fabric of all feminist interventions that seek to rework the material constitution of bodies, institutions, imaginaries, laws, culture, times and spaces. My contention here is that the activist, epistemic and ontological legacies of the British Women's Liberation Movement (WLM)[4] are woefully – and irresponsibly – absent from how 'gender-critical' feminists in the UK have articulated their arguments about what feminism is, and who its constituents are. In their fervent and often cruel expressions, they ventriloquize the building blocks of feminist knowledge upon which they stand, but simultaneously disavow. Transgender activists and their allies also frequently overlook potential alliances with the activist struggles of the WLM. This is perhaps understandable given the persistent characterisation of the WLM as irreducibly distant from and inherently hostile to trans experiences, of all kinds. Even so, this is an injustice to the radicalism of the WLM – a social movement that must be credited for creating conceptual and lived resources for much of the feminism, including transfeminist discourse, we can speak and think with today.

A different public understanding of feminism's theoretical and activist history is therefore required: one that gives proper place to its activist foundations in the WLM and demonstrates how this movement has been entangled with a kind-of transgender politics from its inception. I say *kind-of* here with some caution, knowing the dangers of bringing different historical periods into conversation when it might not always be possible to situate alliance through obviously shared conceptual or political languages. The WLM's gender politics cannot be mapped seamlessly onto contemporary trans struggles, this much is true. Nevertheless, contemporary trans politics are in part a legacy of the WLM, and in particular, the way the movement created meaningful and supportive contexts for those designated 'female' at birth to re-invent their

embodied and psychic existences. Through expanding what 'woman' could be, the experimental social contexts the movement created transformed what it meant to be a woman or a man, a girl or a boy, in everyday life.[5] In this arena, the WLM has contributed substantially to the *trans-formation* of sex by making gender legible as a social practice. So whilst there has been a drive to uncover and understand the historical legacies of trans exclusionary or anti-trans feminism, it is also important to ask other questions about the histories of feminist activism and knowledge. How has women's liberation conditioned the transfeminist present, and how did medicalised ideas about transsexuality and intersex influence the development of feminist knowledge in the early 70s?

Gender and transformation

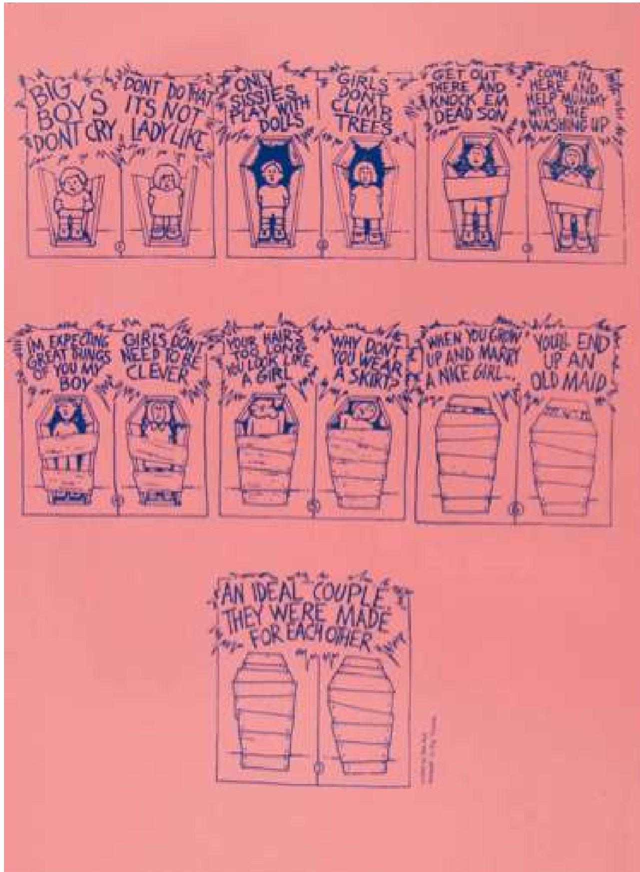
The WLM created social contexts that re-made women's nature. As a social movement it staged a sustained revolt '*against* natural laws'.[6] Its ontological and political legacies are an example of what Dimitris Papadopoulos calls 'activist materialism' that 'mixes ontology and practice through and through'. In *Experimental Practice*, Papadopoulos describes the history of activist materialism as 'unstable [and] full of discontinuities and breaks'. Within this understanding, 'matter itself cannot be conceived outside or as a mere object of human practice but *as a process of change*.'[7] What is fundamentally missing from our understanding of the WLM – whether invoked within the paywalls of academic feminist theory or the rabid annals of twitter – is *how* the WLM contributed to the substantial transformation of the female sex's *material* existence. This transformative activity gave form to the social apparatus and enduringly tricky playground we now call 'gender'. It opened up socio-legal, cultural and psychic fields to the exploration of potential alternatives in which a woman could deviate from her 'nature' and 'change the ontological conditions of everyday existence'.[8]

Such social engineering was possible because the movement was informed by a new kind of conceptual, as well as technoscientific, freedom to experiment across the boundaries of 'nature' and 'nurture.' British sociologist Ann Oakley's 1972 book *Sex, Gender and Society* is credited in the English Oxford Dictionary as introducing the modern usage of the word 'gender', and it is here we find the history of women's liberation and transgender lives braided in the most intimate tangle. In an oral history interview conducted in 2012, Oakley reflects on how she adapted 'gender' from psychiatric concepts used to explain the psychic and embodied experiences of transsexual and intersex people:

> [I adapted the term 'gender'] from American psychiatry, psychiatrists who were working with people with various degrees of, I mean, you know, women who thought they were actually men and men who thought they were actually women, and people born with various degrees of physical intersexual conditions. They, those psychiatrists had realised that you have to make a distinction between what biology provides in the way of a body, and what the culture provides in the form of ideas about how men and women ought to behave.[9]

Oakley's appropriation of a particular historical and medicalised construction that sought to grapple with transsexual experience is often overlooked. Studying the socio-medical phenomenon of intersex and transsexuality can, she wrote in 1972, 'tell us a great deal about the relative parts played by biology and social rearing: there are a multitude of ways in which it can illuminate the debate about the origin of sex differences. To start with what is perhaps the most striking finding, boys without penises may become "normal" males: girls with penises and without uteruses may become "normal" females.'[10] By the late 1970s, other feminist sociologists echoed her conceptual move, claiming transsexual women 'as striking examples of processes that affected all women's lives,' material evidence of the 'plasticity of gender, giving credibility to agendas of social change.'[11]

To understand the epistemological evolution of contemporary feminism, the centrality of transgender must be taken seriously. The WLM was informed by a medicalised understanding of transgender. Such logic lay at the root of the movement's investigation into how everyday life could be different for women and men, girls and boys; it demonstrated the dissonance between ascription and lived experience, that biology need not be destiny and existence could, through cultivation, be made – and re-made – otherwise. The WLM spread transgender through its social bodies. While it did not explicitly define activist claims, this form of politics was nonetheless 'forcefully present' in a historical opening that questioned and practically overcame the limitations of sex.[12]



It is certainly true that women's liberationists used 'gender' to emphasise the repressive aspects of social conditioning, rather than foreground gender's liberatory potential. Gay Preston's illustration, published in 1974, presents a striking critique of the violence of gender socialisation.[13] It starts with a boy and girl inside open boxes that gradually close up into coffins as the children grow up. Commonplace statements declaring the rigidity of gender stereotypes accompany the illustrations: 'only sissies play with dolls' and 'girls don't climb trees'. The coffins are too small for adult bodies, figures are squashed into spaces they could never fit: 'your hair's too long you look like a girl', 'you'll end up an old maid'. The final nail in the coffin is marriage: the grand institution of what Adrienne Rich would later call 'compulsory heterosexuality'; a social death represented by the blank, boarded up coffins. For many women's liberationists, it was this kind of gender that had to be destroyed. Gender stereotypes were – and remain – maddeningly stultifying. So if 'gender-critical' feminists express antipathy toward 'gender', this could be a hangover from a historical moment when gender was equated wholesale with negative conditioning. 'We wanted to get *rid of* gender', they argue, not give it social substance. Yet this is to overlook an important fact: the WLM gave new life and meaning to 'gender'. 'Gender', in the context of the movement, became a malleable property. It was no longer simply restrictive; it also became expansive. This socialised enlargement pulled 'sex' into a dialogical process that reconfigured its shape and substance too.

Practices of women's liberation

The British WLM was grounded in experimental, prefigurative 'lifestyle' politics that questioned what it meant to be a 'woman' outside of patriarchal conditioning. One of the many tendencies that informed the WLM's political frameworks was 'cultural feminism': a kind of feminism imported from the US that sought to create a 'women's culture.' In the US, 'women's culture' was associated with women-only activities such as music festivals, record labels, bands, credit unions and publishing houses, as well as aesthetic theories about language, film, fashion, music and spirituality.[14] These ideas travelled to the UK via musical products and other kinds of 'merchandise' produced within the US WLM, but also, crucially, through individual activists who visited the US and were inspired by the example of women-only organisation, autonomy and empowerment.[15]

Sophie Lewis has recently argued, following historian Alice Echols, that 'cultural feminism' represented a 'paranoid faction' of US radical feminism that gave rise to transphobic feminist ideology in the US. Lewis also implies this influence was reproduced, homogenously, in the UK.[16] She writes that trans exclusionary feminism 'crossed over to Britain in the 1980s, when cultural feminism was among the lesbian-separatist elements of antinuclear protest groups who saw themselves as part of a "feminist resistance" to patriarchal science, taking a stand against nuclear weapons, test-tube babies and male-to-female transsexual surgery alike.'[17] This periodisation and location of trans exclusionary feminism does not, however, adequately reflect the historical conditions that gave rise to the phenomenon in Britain. In the British WLM, cultural feminism was more practical than ideological, pragmatic rather than paranoid. It was the means through which women would build 'an alternative society where women are not oppressed; housing networks, farms, businesses, busic [sic], art & therapy are all steps in the direction of women taking power.'[18]

Ideas about 'women's culture' helped create new kinds of contexts – experimental social laboratories – in which the female sex was bent into new, irreversible shapes. As women learnt how to fix PA systems, repair faulty car engines, explore the contours of a drum kit, or mend the plumbing, their sex was not – and never could be – insulated from 'gender': each force field fed into and modulated the other, expanding what the female sex could 'be' through exposure to techniques and *practice*. Such activities were central to constructing a material power of women's liberation, to paraphrase Cynthia Cockburn, which utilised women-only networks, spatial politics and technique to change women's position in society on an individual and collective basis.[19] The ex-*pressions* of bodily life that flowed from the movement's gender laboratories were acts of social sculpting[20] which became 'materially ingrained into the affects, the muscles, the sociability, the desires, the lifeworlds'[21] of feminism – and across wider society – in decades to come. Re-educating and re-training the female body – enabling the exploration of alternative forms of existence – happened *within* the WLM, *inside* its material politics. The construction of women-only spaces – unmarked by the categorical differentiations that characterise contemporary feminism such as 'cis-gender women' and 'trans women' – intensified experimentation. Women-only spaces enabled participants to cultivate and transform their potential; the female sex began to walk, talk and make life in new ways. This ontological transformation of the female sex deposited lasting material residues in social space which potential subsequent generations have fed off, picked up and lived with, often without realising it: an accumulation of feminist debt[22] that furnishes the possibility for thinking and acting in the world in feminist ways.

The theoretical roots of trans-exclusionary feminism in the British WLM were, in contrast, laid down in 1977 when a renegade faction – 'revolutionary feminism' – came to prominence.[23] Revolutionary feminism modified Shulamith Firestone's ideas about sex class – dislocating Firestone's emphasis on technology as key to women's liberation – and arose, so its founders claimed, because women's liberation in Britain lacked a coherent political theory. Since the WLM had emerged in the late 60s, revolutionary feminists argued, the movement had been 'water[ed] down' and now 'ceas[ed] to be a threat' – a dilution which 'cultural feminism', they argued, was partly responsible for.[24] For revolutionary feminists, 'sex struggle is the struggle. All women are in the 'class' that is women, subsuming all minor differences – which anyway come from male supremacy.' As with contemporary 'gender-critical' feminists, revolutionary feminists placed great emphasis on biology and were peculiarly fixated on genitals: 'Possession of a penis, an external and visible singular organ which tumesces toward the ultimate orgasm and then collapses, *apparently with a will of its own*, will colour a man's experience of life.'[25] The penis, they claimed, was a 'physical disability or mutation' that marked a man as 'animal', and male violence against women was framed as a response to a traumatic realisation of an 'inability to bring forth life.' 'Yes we are angry, yes we do love women, yes we do hate men [...] yes all women are a class, yes all men are potential rapists [...] yes we are extremists'[26] they incanted. Revolutionary feminists, rather than 'cultural feminism', have pushed forward the trans-exclusionary agenda in Britain. Many of its adherents – the most well known being Sheila Jeffreys – are prominent voices in the resurgence of 'gender-critical' activism in the twenty-first century.[27]

Technics of sex and gender

From the late 60s onwards, feminist demands in the UK for female autonomy (articulated since the 1920s)[28] synthesised with a technoscientific context that enabled the concept of autonomy – once abstract and distant – to become a lived experimental practice. The WLM converged with a historical moment when the ontological ground opened up and swallowed any remaining fantasies of static and symmetrical sex roles: of man as 'the human' and woman as appendage, constructed from his excess bodily matter, that mythic 'spare rib'. Upon that ground, the reality of female autonomy was furnished with mobility and women tested and tore past limitations of their flesh. The freedoms to explore what the 'female' body could do in the 70s – how it could be substantially stylised and re-configured – were therefore *epochally unique*.[29] Wider availability of birth control meant this micro-generation could experiment intensively in everyday life, 'intoxicated and belligerent about their freedom not to have babies'.[30] Birth control technology enabled the 'female sex' to rigorously *practice* autonomy, even though such autonomy was by no means

distributed evenly across divisions of race, class and geographical location.[31] Birth control technologies were not a panacea and for some women were deployed coercively to curtail or block their capacity and right *to* reproduce. Nonetheless, these technologies substantially 'modified [the] environment' in which women existed and opened up a radically 'new field of action, demanding a new adaptation and arousing new needs'.[32]

For revolutionary feminists, however, the female sex's increased proximity to technoscientific innovation did more to poison the possibility of women's liberation rather than support it. Lewis rightly points out that technophobia runs through the trans exclusionary feminist imaginary,[33] and such fear is clearly articulated in 'Some Plans Men Have for Our Future,' a document written by revolutionary feminists in the late 70s.[34] Revolutionary feminists flipped women's increased access to birth control to highlight the possibility of 'sex choice'; they discussed the introduction of 'gels' that would 'enable you to choose the sex of your child' while in 'the future embryo feminists would be adjusted by counseling at gender-identity clinics or turned into "men."'[35] Transsexuality, along with male homosexuality, was presented as the logical outcome of a world where girls and women were fated for elimination under the rubric of scientific progress with 'transsexual surgery [being] a creation of men, initially developed for men.' Transsexualism, they speculated, was the means 'to replace women preparatory to reducing their numbers. The women that men create are far closer to their ideal than a "natural" woman could ever be.' The paper concludes with cautionary words about the development of mini computers and 'chip' technology. Worries about automation and unemployment haunt each wave of technological change and in the late 70s 'it will not have elapsed your attention that it is in the main "women's jobs" that are being eliminated' through rapid computerisation. This created, they argued, an 'obvious' need for 'capitalism and male supremacy to reduce the numbers of women, and hence people in the future.' The connections for revolutionary feminists were abundantly clear: "'sex choice" will do it for them.' Women were, the revolutionary feminists insisted, 'an endangered species'.[36]

But the simple fact is that human society, always already conditioned by technics, cannot move back to a mythical and unsullied 'state of nature'. Such a pure state never existed and experiments in the gendered realm do not leave sex untouched[37]. Of course technoscience is not inherently liberatory and can be oppressive in the wrong hands. Yet women's liberation – the rapid and dramatic change in many women's lives over the past 50 or so years – would not have been possible without technoscience that supported bodily experimentation. No matter what the 'gender critics' may say, in the world today you can indeed transform your sex, and such a process can occur in many different ways, through surgery, hormonal change, fantasy, aesthetic presentation and more. It is not the case that one is born a woman and can never become a man, or whatever else there is to become.

D-M Withers' work engages with feminist heritage; they are currently researching the history of feminist publishing as part of the Leverhulme-funded project 'The Business of Women's Words'.

Notes

1. See Hatpins to Hashtags, 'Feminist Futures,' accessed 7 April 2019, https://h2h.feministarchivesouth.org.uk/feminist-futures.
2. Cockburn, 'Terfs take America...: what happened when British female rights activists went to Washington?, *Spectator USA*, 31 January 2019, https://spectator.us/terfs-take-america/.
3. See 'Teaching Individuals Gender Equality & Respect' (TIGER) website, http://www.tigerbristol.co.uk/about.html.
4. The Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) was the largest women-centred social movement active in 1970s Britain. White majority and middle-class in cities, its regional, de-centralised structure meant its class reach was complex and broader. The politics of the movement extended to 'ordinary' women through magazine publications like *Spare Rib* and books published by Virago Press and the Women's Press. From 1971, the WLM was autonomous and women organised separately from men to support their 'liberation'. The WLM was ideologically heterogeneous and employed multiple political strategies to address women's exclusion from public life and oppression in the everyday. The Black Women's Movement (BWM) and Wages for Housework (WFH) are examples of other women-centred movements from the 70s. The BWM was black and working class majority while WFH was predominantly characterised by coalitional work between working class white and black women. The BWM and WFH were smaller than the WLM but were no less significant in terms of their contribution to feminist knowledge and activism. Of most relevance here is that the BWM and WFH did not share the same political contentions about transgender as were expressed by minority factions in the WLM. For more on the WLM's regionalism see Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: a view from some English towns, c.1968–1990', *Women's History Review* 25:5 (2016), 723–740.

For an introduction to the history of the BWM in Britain see Diana Watt and Adele D. Jones, *Catching Hell and Doing Well: Black Women in the UK – the Abasindi Cooperative* (London: Trentham Books, 2015), and on WFH and coalitional working see Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77* (London: Pluto Press, 2018) and Wilmette Brown, *Black Women and the Peace Movement* (Bristol: Falling Wall, 1983). For a general introduction to the history of women-centred movements in Britain, see 'Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project, 2010–2013', British Library, accessed 7 April 2019, https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood.

5. For example, Pat VT West refers to 'real' trans women being present at the Acton conference in 1972, a conference that herself and Jackie Thrupp attended in male drag; the keyboard player for the Northern Women's Liberation Rock Band was a transsexual woman and performed with them at the 1974 Edinburgh National Women's Liberation conference. It would be a significant stretch to say that transsexual women and men were *welcomed* in the movement, but there is limited testimonial and archival evidence that they were *present.* Pat VT West interviewed by Viv Honeybourne, 'Personal Histories of Second-Wave Feminism, 2000-01', Feminist Archive South, University of Bristol Special Collections, DM2123/1/Archive Boxes 79.

6. Sally Fraser and Amanda Sebestyen, 'Going Orange' in *'68, '78, '88: From Women's Liberation to Feminism*, ed. Amanda Sebestyen (Bridport: Prism Press, 1988), 104–116, 107. Emphasis added.

7. Dimitris Papadopoulos, *Experimental Practice: Technoscience, Alterontologies and More-Than-Social Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 79–81.

8. Ibid., 79.

9. Ann Oakley interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, 'Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project, 2010-2013', British Library Sound & Moving Image Catalogue reference C1420/56/01, transcript p. 50/track 1. © The British Library and The University of Sussex.

10. Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972), 159.

11. Raewynn Connell, 'Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought: Toward New Understanding and New Politics,' *Signs*, 37: 4 (2012), 857-881, 861.

12. Papadopoulos, *Experimental Practice*, 6.

13. The illustration was first published in the collection *Conditions of Illusion: Papers from the Women's Movement* and later printed by the See Red Poster collective: https://seeredwomensworkshop.wordpress.com/.

14. See Gayle Kimball (ed.) *Women's Culture: Renaissance of the Seventies* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1981).

15. For an example of how 'Women's Music' travelled across transnational borders, see D-M Withers, "'neither pure love nor imitating capitalism": Euro WILD and the invention of Women's Music distribution in Europe, 1980–1982', *Feminist Review*, 120:1 (2018), 85-100.

16. Sophie Lewis, 'How British Feminism Became Anti-Trans,' *New York Times*, 7 February 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html.

17. Lewis, 'How British Feminism Became Anti-Trans'. Although Greenham Common was a women-only peace camp it is noted by scholars and camp attendees as a site of gender and sexual experimentation (Sasha Roseneil, *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The Queer Feminisms of Greenham*, (London: Continuum, 2000)); inventive material politics (Anna Feigenbaum, 'From cyborg feminism to drone feminism: Remembering women's anti-nuclear activisms', *Feminist Theory*, 16:3 (2015), 265–288); a central node in the international women-centred peace movement of the 80s (Alison Bartlett, 'Sites of feminist activism: *Remembering Pine Gap*', *Continuum*, 30:3 (2016), 307–315, among others. It is worth remembering that Ann Pettitt, one of the founders of Women for Life on Earth who organised the walk to Greenham in 1981, did so because she was alienated by the specific kind of separatism promoted by revolutionary feminism. See Ann Pettitt, *Walking To Greenham: How the Peace Camp Began and the Cold War Ended* (Aberystwyth: Honno, 2006). See also http://www.yourgreenham.co.uk/.

18. Amanda Sebastyen, *Feminist Practice: Notes from the Tenth Year! (Theoretically Speaking)* (London: In Theory Press, 1979).

19. Cynthia Cockburn, 'The Material of Male Power,' *Feminist Review*, 9:1 (1981), 41–58.

20. Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery Vol. 2*, (Basingstoke: Policy, 2015).

21. Papadopoulos, *Experimental Practice*, 43.

22. Sumi Madhok has articulated a notion of feminist debt at 'Politics of Struggle', LSE, 12 February 2019.

23. For more on debates between revolutionary feminists and other factions in the WLM see the excellent Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger: the Women's Liberation Movement in 1978,' *Women's History Review*, 19:3 (2010), 337–356.

24. Revolutionary Feminists,'Statement from the First Year', British Library Add MS 89305/17 (1978).

25. Ibid., emphasis added.

26. Ibid.

27. 'Academics are being harassed over their research into trans issues', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/oct/16/academics-are-being-harassed-over-their-research-into-transgender-issues.

28. See for example, the activities and theory of the Family Endowment Society in Clare Debenham, *Birth Control and the Rights* of *Women. Post-Suffrage Feminism* in the *Early Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

29. Juliet Mitchell, 'Women: The Longest Revolution', *New Left Review*, 40 (1966).

30. Zoe Fairbairns, *Benefits* (London: Virago 1979), 14.

31. 'Depo–Provera: The Ignorance Injection,' Black Cultural Archives DADZIE 1/10.

32. Gilbert Simondon [1965] 'Culture and Technics', *Radical Philosophy* 189 (2015), 17–23.

33. Sophie Lewis, 'Serf and Terf: Some Notes on Some Bad Materialisms,' *Salvage*, 6 February 2017, http://salvage.zone/in-print/serf-n-terf-notes-on-some-bad-materialisms/.

34. Sheila Jeffreys, Sandra McNeil, Maria Katyachild and Siva Rosachild (n.d.) 'Some Plans Men Have for Our Future.' British Library Add MS 89305/17.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).