



Clare Hemmings

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## Care without compliance – building transfeminist futures

*Trans Femme Futures: Abolitionist Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds* by Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift explores how transfeminist methods and practices can build futures that are more equal, free and inclusive for all. **Clare Hemmings** writes that the authors' brilliant, nuanced embrace of community, care and modes of resistance offers radical ways of realising more liveable futures.

***Trans Femme Futures: Abolitionist Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds.* Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift. Pluto Press. 2024.**

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I was lucky enough to be asked to be a respondent for *Trans Femme Futures: Abolitionist Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds* at the **book launch** organised by the Sociology Department at LSE in March 2025. It was that vibrant event that led me to want to write this reflection. *Trans Femme Futures* is a co-authored book by Nata Raha and Mijke van der Drift that emerges out of their shared histories of trans community organising and commitment to progressive Left and anti-racist organising. The work – and this reflection on it – is extremely timely, representing the importance of a Trans Femme approach to solidarity and care in the face of increasing transphobia in the UK and transnationally. While the book's urgency is one that responds positively and creatively – rather than reactively – to challenges (such as the **recent Supreme Court Judgment** establishing “sex” as “biological sex” and not “legal sex” for the purposes of **the Equality Act**), the book itself refuses to have the argument about ‘sex’ and trans dignity in dominant terms. Instead, its authors propose a philosophy of Trans Femme life that intervenes in historical ontology, feminist, queer and decolonial epistemology. It crafts Trans Femme methods for bringing about a liveable future for all starting from the tactics that characterise Trans Femme lives.

## Building futures through resistance and community

Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift's intervention is a celebration of the features of Trans Femme life that enable Trans Femme Futures to flourish. At its heart, it is a prefigurative proposal in an anarchist vein, one that starts from *the reality of how we live together over the promise of a better life*. [Note that in line with my desire to "read with" Nat and Mijke, I represent quotations from the book *in italics* rather than quotation marks and page numbers.] Their work begins from the pain of not being able to flourish, but proceeds from a fundamental resistance to dominant understandings of trans subjectivity as ontologically and forever suffering or dying. In a wonderful refusal of dominant ways of rendering Trans Femme possibility, Nat and Mijke start from *luxuriousness, opulence, abundance* to craft understandings of community belonging that refuse dismissal and relish co-dependence as at the core of those futures. Our companions are under no illusions that *we face a history of defeats*, but all the more important, then, is the insistence that *we read a long line of rebellions that give us insights, tactics, strategies, outcomes, and ways of maintaining ourselves*.

## Collectivity, refusal and an ethics of care

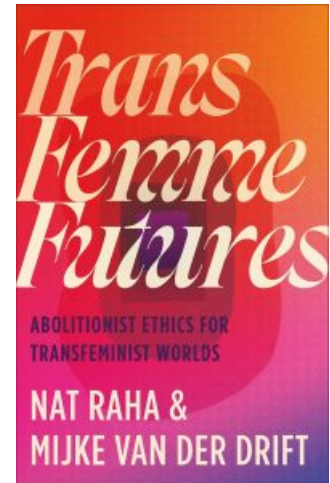
Attention to ethics is a sweet refrain running through Nat and Mijke's writing, providing the "red thread" that enables the discussions of care, community and abolition to be earthed and to proliferate. They insist that ideas from a singular actor reproduce their position, and so are *devoid of curiosity*, temporally bound, and reproductive of a sameness that they want to resist at all levels. They conceive of solidarity as a practice infused with an ethics of generosity, one that emphasises *collectivity over being right*, a principle that they weave through the book as a whole. This is a brave move, of course, since it is so tempting, isn't it, to respond to the horrors of transphobia and racism (the twin concerns of the book) with brittle certainties that are likely to crack?



*Theirs is an important and courageous proposition in the face of the relentless feminisation of labour, the affective labour that Femme subjects are called upon to do, the ongoing structures of hierarchical social reproduction that exploit gendered caring labour in predictable ways.*



That imperfection is the only thing that collectivity can be based in, they insist. And so they *propose an ethics that embraces complicity* as central to that capacity to connect both now and in the future. Indeed Nat and Mijke frame the *willingness to face frictions* as a core proposition, rather than as a temporary state to be resolved. That is important, both to counter fantasies of collectives as *frictionless spaces of innocence*, but also as a principle to underpin a vision of solidarity that already, within Femme worlds, *holds out the possibility of rewiring of one's senses, retuning our intuitions into the frequencies of our complicities*. It is a technique, not a stumbling block, that allows *different flowers [to] come into bloom*.



Core to an ethics emphasising both complicity and connection is care, which Nat and Mijke frame as *about supporting each other's survival, towards flourishing*. Theirs is an important and courageous proposition in the face of the relentless feminisation of labour, the affective labour that Femme subjects are called upon to do, the ongoing structures of hierarchical social reproduction that exploit gendered caring labour in predictable ways. It would be easy to refuse caring, here, because of its history and present as not only unrecognised labour, but as a set of practices that actively contribute to the racialised, gendered and sexualised subordination of many of the world's affective workers. And yet, *we don't want to give up care, because care is a mutual relation – what we give up is servitude*. This is care without compliance in the gendered systems of labour and representation that a Trans Femme philosophy has no truck with: because it cannot, or else invite death back in.



*Trans Femme Futures is an intersectional project, because of the insistence on coloniality as an ongoing framing of deadening gender and 'sex', but also because of the people Nat and Mijke read with [...] at the heart of their radical imagination*



Theorising a collective ethics based in care-as-refusal of the gendered labour that Trans Femmes have crafted out lives in spite of is a brilliant engagement with history of feminist thinking about “sex” as produced through gendered labour. It is a way of opening up the multiple histories of work on refusing that labour that might allow for solidarity across trans and non-binary, queer and anti-racist positions of a range of kinds. I’m reminded of course of **Monique Wittig’s insistence** that “lesbians are not women”, not as a question, but as a fact. They are not women because they don’t do the right work – for men, for straightness, for conventional knowledge or politics. Trans masculine and gender non-conforming subjects also don’t do that work either, and nor do queer femmes, queers of colour, sex workers, or what used to be called spinsters.

## Towards decolonial feminist futures

*Trans Femme Futures* is an intersectional project, because of the insistence on coloniality as an ongoing framing of deadening gender and “sex”, but also because of the people Nat and Mijke read with – trans of colour theorists such as **Travis Alabanza**, decolonial feminists such as **Francoise Verges**, and femmes such as **Juana Rodriguez** – at the heart of their radical imagination. The citation of an alternative transnational archive refuses the dominant, and reflects the Trans Femme Standpoint their work struggles towards. And I would extend that to include the importance of insisting on feminist epistemology that starts from all gender and “sexed” non-conforming struggle as the basis of robust, creative knowledge for our times.

My thanks to the authors of this book for reminding me that life is always lived in excess of the limits imposed by authoritarians and cowards.

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***Note:** This article gives the views of the author and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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