Beyond Diversity Ventriloquism: How *Mujer T* Is Transing Inclusion in Bogotá

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In 2013 the mayor's office of Bogotá organized the first ever Mujer T. *The event, originally conceived as a beauty pageant, generated considerable controversy. Unexpectedly, however, most of the criticism came not from conservative groups, but from well-known cisgender feminist scholars who criticized the event from a traditional gender perspective. A heated debate about the needs, challenges, desires, and opportunities of trans women continued during the weeks prior to the event. The discussion played out through blogs, social media, and private and public conversations. Nevertheless, although there was much talk about transwomen, there was little room for their voices. This article argues that because of the actors involved, the dynamics and content of the conversations, and the changes that took place in its aftermath,* Mujer T 2013 *highlights how trans people's bodies, expressions—whether related to gender, culture, or politics—and self-determination processes are intensely policed and contested, even by those whose explicit intent is to support and celebrate them. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of what happened around* Mujer T 2013 *has important lessons for the development of trans-inclusive policies and initiatives, feminist scholarship and practice, and institutional and societal change.*

In 2013 the mayor's office of the city of Bogotá (Colombia) organized *Mujer T* ("T Woman"), an event originally conceived as a beauty pageant for trans women. *Mujer T* was intended to be one of the many cultural activities of the annual Equality Week, but controversy ensued rapidly and it became the most known and contested event of the festival. In some ways, this is to be expected. Beauty pageants have a salient role in Colombian culture. Though the exact number is unknown, it is estimated that more than three hundred pageants take place each year in the country (Stanfield 2013, 1). Beauty pageants display and reinforce social and racial hierarchies, as well as patriarchal notions of gender roles that objectify women, attaching their value to specific physical attributes and unattainable beauty standards. They may appear superficial and menial, but their meaning runs deep in Colombia: they are battlegrounds where socially accepted notions of femininity, citizenry, race, class, activism, and

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political participation are played out, challenged, and redefined. Because of their social relevance and the ideological work that pageants perform, beauty pageants are often a source of controversy. The situation can become more contentious when, despite sharing the same goals, the parties involved come from different social, cultural, and academic backgrounds and have diverse embodied experiences of self with respect to sex, gender identity, sexuality, race, and national belonging. From its beginning, *Mujer T* was a contested space because it hoped to construct a trans-inclusive space of empowerment while cementing patriarchal notions of femininity that contribute to the marginalization of trans and cis women alike. Thus, the role that a successful accomplishment of gender—one based on patriarchal notions of femininity—may have in trans-inclusive spaces aimed at creating positive changes in the social imaginary, and in the political and economic empowerment of the participants, early on became a contested terrain for feminist thought and practice, public officials, and activists in Bogotá. Because of the actors involved, the dynamics and content of the conversations, and the changes that took place in its aftermath, *Mujer T 2013* constitutes a valuable case study of the tensions and possibilities generated as local governments in Latin America work on including marginalized populations in processes of participatory democracy and active citizenship. At the core of *Mujer T* and the controversy around it lies the question of what role, if any, the mobilization of traditional notions of femininity and gender accomplishment may have as catalysts of agency and empowerment, and for achieving social change within the spaces available for historically marginalized women, in this case trans women in Bogotá. In other words, *Mujer T* asks whether patriarchal notions of femininity can have feminist outcomes in concrete places and events. Are the master's tools always already oppressive, or can they also be mobilized to carve out (imperfect and even short-lived) spaces for personal and communal empowerment and contestation?

The actors involved in these conversations, as well as the tone and arguments used, were—and continue to be—broad and varied. However, I ground my analysis in the only documented debate that addressed the issue. This debate, which took place two weeks prior to *Mujer T 2013*, is important because it was the first and only time that the main positions about the event were openly—and publicly—expressed and debated. The arguments put forth by the various participants shaped the conversation about *Mujer T* and greatly influenced the way in which it would be perceived and reconceived in its ensuing iterations. To contextualize and strengthen my work, I also look at the events that led to the debate, and pay close attention to the comments written by other trans women on social media during and after the debate. I complement my sources with follow-up interviews, email correspondence, and phone conversations with stakeholders, and public-policy documents that trace the changes in the language and practice of *Mujer T*.

Conceptually, my thought is informed by Viviane Namaste's emphasis on the relationship among feminist epistemology, practice, and methodology as explained in "Undoing Theory: 'The Transgender Question' and the Epistemic Violence of Anglo-American Feminist Theory." Her call for a feminist empiricism that challenges the "just add [trans] women and stir approach" (Namaste 2009, 20), which in her view has

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prevailed in what is perhaps the best-known and most influential strand of feminist thought, provides nuance and a more productive understanding of the conversations about *Mujer T*. Namaste argues that part of what made feminist critique so powerful was its refusal to simply "insert" women into existing disciplines and institutions. Instead, feminists demanded the radical rethinking of such frameworks and spaces from a perspective that incorporated women's embodied experiences. Namaste then laments that, when it comes to transgender issues, feminism has too often moved away from this fertile methodological praxis, and it has approached the experiences and realities of transgender people primarily as theoretical proxies "to ask [feminism's] own epistemological questions" (12). Sufficient attention has not been paid either to the material aspects the realization of gender has for trans women, or to "the extent to which transsexual women themselves have been served by such an academic feminist project" (12). For Namaste, this methodological shift is problematic. On the one hand, it limits feminism's scope, complexity, and relevance. On the other hand, it constitutes a form of epistemic violence because it turns underrepresented populations (in this case trans women) into objects, not subjects, of discourse and knowledge-production.

This dynamic has significant similarities to the way in which the conversation about *Mujer T* took place. Specific comments made by Jessica Useche, the only trans woman invited to the debate, speak to the frustration of not having a say even within the discourses and institutional spaces supposedly aimed at encouraging and mobilizing such voices. Useche's statements allude to broader anxieties with regard to shifting relations of power between and within sex and gender social movements (Sentiido 2013a). In their introduction to *Hypatia*'s special issue on transgender studies and feminism, Talia Bettcher and Ann Garry acknowledge that questions about "who gets access to a voice (and why) as well as about the political agendas of those who have been granted a voice" (Bettcher and Garry 2009, 6) are key issues facing feminism and other theories and practices that, from within and beyond academia, seek equity and social justice. Their concerns echo Linda Alcoff's reasoning in "The Problem of Speaking for Others." In her classic essay, Alcoff asks whether "the discursive practice of speaking for others [is] ever a valid practice and, if so, what are the criteria for validity?" (Alcoff 1991–1992, 7). Alcoff concludes that utterances that make communal claims are sometimes not only called for, but also necessary (24–25), if those performing and analyzing such speech rituals consider the political context, the particular power relations involved, and the effects produced by these remarks. Building on the arguments articulated by Bettcher and Garry, as well as those of Alcoff and Namaste, I offer the term *diversity ventriloquism* as a means of calling attention to the complex and changing power dynamics among institutional, individual, and/or academic speech acts pertaining to the advancement of inclusive policies and discourse. As its name indicates, diversity ventriloquism is the—common and often unconscious—practice through which some organizations or individuals appropriate the voices and experiences of marginalized others as a way to enhance their professional standing, academic field, or institutional image. It occurs when individuals or institutions appoint themselves the task of speaking for marginalized communities using their educational and cultural backgrounds, tapping into their socioeconomic privilege, or following institutional guidelines. Diversity

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ventriloquism prioritizes the views of people who are relatively removed from the communities on whose behalf they are advocating. Emphasis is placed on those who produce and articulate the discourse for specific audiences at particular times, and it therefore consolidates the position of those who assume the role of spokespersons, boosting their economic and symbolic capital. Diversity ventriloquism centralizes and homogenizes discourse, preventing other voices from surfacing and/or gaining legitimacy. Therefore, instead of meeting the needs of marginalized communities, encouraging spaces of knowledge-production from within such communities, or becoming catalysts of agency, willingly or not, diversity ventriloquism uses trans people—and other marginalized individuals—largely as political tokens in the growing economy of empathy and diversity.

To avoid this, a critical reimagining of feminist methodologies that make relevance and equity in partnership guiding principles of meaningful social research, theory, and, one could add, public policy, is in order (Namaste 2009, 24). Knowledge-production and social policies should follow the needs and interests of communities and not those of the scholars and institutions that investigate them. Furthermore, equity in partnership means that the underrepresented minorities stop being objects and start being subjects of discourse by having equal say and voice in all aspects of empirical research (25), and in the design and implementation of public policy. More than the physical incorporation of diverse bodies in institutional spaces and theoretical frameworks, what is required is the transing of such spaces and frameworks. In their introduction to a special edition of *Women's Studies Quarterly* devoted to transgender studies, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore explain:

> "Transing"... is a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly.... Transing can function ... as an escape vector, line of flight, or pathway toward liberation. (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 13)

Mujer T can most productively be analyzed as a still-evolving space of transing. As a case study, *Mujer T 2013* and its aftermath are illustrative of the social scripts that permeate many discussions about trans-inclusive theories and policies. Understanding the dynamics of what happened during and after *Mujer T 2013* has important lessons for regional conversations about how to engage in constructive dialogue among different stakeholders seeking to promote effective change, and for the development of trans-inclusive policies and initiatives, feminist scholarship and practice, and institutional and societal change more broadly.

On Recognition, Beauty Pageants, and Trans Women's Gendered Experiences

In 2013 the mayor's office of Bogotá was eager to respond to feedback that rightly pointed out that in the two previous Equality Weeks (in 2011 and 2012), there had been few events geared toward trans women.[1] Looking for ideas, the Office of Sexual

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Diversity (*Dirección de Diversidad Sexual*) did an online survey in which it asked self-identified trans women and their allies to propose cultural activities that represented their community. More than 140 people responded, and the majority requested a beauty pageant. The idea was then discussed by the Alliance for the Full Citizenship of LGBT people (*Alianza por la Ciudadanía Plena de los Sectores LGBT*) (Alcaldía 2014, 1). The *Alianza* is a space where ideas about LGBT-inclusive policies are discussed and debated. When the proposal was put forth, not everybody, specifically not all trans women, agreed. However, after people expressed their thoughts and apprehensions, they reached consensus and formed a united front, agreeing to work within that space to create opportunities for the advancement of the rights of trans women. *Mujer T* was thus born, and preparations started.

Soon after, Nancy Prada—a well-known, cisgender, feminist scholar at the Gender Studies Center (*Escuela de Estudios de Género*) of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia—wrote a blog post where she questioned the judgment of city officials by highlighting the sexist and racist components that underlie all pageants, whether trans or cisgender (Prada 2013). Prada's standing in academic circles as well as her access to media outlets gave her arguments resonance, and the administration was put in the spotlight. Both pressured and concerned about the impact that a public controversy may have had for trans women's visibility, the event itself, and the general perception of the week, the mayor's office backtracked. They changed the name from "pageant" to "event" and sought to temper the beauty component by highlighting the cultural and artistic aspects of the performances. As a result, those who supported—and were already organizing and participating in—the event grew angry and frustrated. The people from the *Alianza*, many of them trans women, felt that their own internal discussion and agreement-reaching process had been ignored, and that external voices had been given more attention because of their social and academic credentials.

To have a public and structured conversation about *Mujer T*, one where different perspectives could be expressed and discussed, Sentiido—an organization that focuses on news and analysis about LGBT and gender issues in Colombia—organized a debate (Sentiido 2013a). The guests were Nancy Prada; Juan Carlos Prieto, Director for Sexual Diversity of Bogotá; and Jessica María Useche, a trans woman with a strong record of community engagement and participation in various offices of LGBT affairs in the city. It was streamed live, and viewers could post their questions and comments via Facebook or directly on their website. Within its limitations, the debate was successful in presenting the main positions around *Mujer T*. In line with other feminist scholars (Cohen, Wilk and Stoetje 1996; Rutter-Jensen 2005; Nasser de la Torre 2013; Stanfield 2013; Ochoa 2014), Prada argued that beauty pageants degrade and objectify women, create unhealthy and impossible body standards, and uphold racist social hierarchies. Useche conceded that this is indeed the case, but argued that these events also play an important role for many trans women. Unlike cisgender women who have borne the pressure of conforming to the limited and limiting standards of femininity, trans women have been relentlessly punished for expressing their own femininity. Useche explained that in Colombian society, where gender roles are heavily policed, these events are often the first—and in many cases, the only—space of affirmation

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and freedom to experiment with, and express, trans feminine gender identity. Prieto looked dazed and confused, trying to acknowledge Prada's critique while defending the positive aspects of *Mujer T* brought up by Useche (Sentiido 2013a).

Two weeks later, the first *Mujer T* was crowned in an event that satisfied no one. But like many failed initiatives, this one brought to light important lessons for public servants, academics, and activists navigating the contested waters of traditional femininity, feminist praxis and discourse, and trans-inclusive initiatives in the global South. Despite the differences of opinion showcased in the debate, having official representatives and various civil-society groups talking about what trans women's most pressing needs are, and what the best way to meet them could be, is certainly an unusual situation in Colombia. Trans people, particularly women, have been historically marginalized, and are often targets of verbal, physical, psychological, and administrative violence in the country. Discrimination is widespread. Per the reported findings of the Sexual Diversity Division of the mayor's office in Bogotá, 92% of transgender people have been victims of discrimination affecting their ability to exercise their right to work, 83% face obstacles in access to education, 76% cannot rent an apartment, 44% have been denied medical services, and only 5.3% have ever signed a work contract (Sentiido 2012). However, recent changes in legislation show that the rights of trans people are slowly but significantly advancing in the city and the country more broadly. In the last five years, court rulings have guaranteed the right to education and the free development of one's personality by requiring schools to respect the gender identity of their students regardless of the sex assigned to them at birth; and in June, 2015, the passing of decree 1227 made it possible to change one's sex on all official documents without psychiatric authorization or medical intervention of any kind. Although much of this recognition is just on paper, and although there is still much to be done, these rights are the result of many years of successful organizing and activism, and they represent significant progress in the country's ideological, legal, political, and cultural transformation.

Further evidence of this important change can be found in both local and regional feminist thought and praxis. Many of the voices committed to recognizing the needs and rights of trans people come from cisgender feminist women like Nancy Prada. Prada has shown her academic commitment to trans-inclusive feminist work,[2] and her critique of *Mujer T* comes from a perspective that does not hesitate to recognize trans women as women. This is in line with gradual but major shifts in the region with regard to the participation of trans women in historically ciswomen-only feminist spaces, and in the increased collaboration between trans and cisgender feminist activists. Although as of 2009 trans women were still struggling to be welcomed to the *XI Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe*, in 2014 trans women were fully integrated into the event, and the *Encuentro* ended with the creation of a special commission to discuss the inclusion of all "feminist expressions and corporealities"—including trans men—in the 2017 conference (Encuentro 2014). Another landmark feminist event in Latin America, the *Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres de Argentina*, allowed the participation of trans women in 2013, the same year *Mujer T* was created. These examples show that in recent years Latin American feminist thought and

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practice has been moving away from discussions about who belongs in the category of woman and has focused instead on the theoretical and social repercussions of the gender performance, accomplishment, and expression of those who identify as female. *Mujer T* should be situated in this larger regional context. What the conversations around it brought to light is precisely this slippage between questions about the politics of essentialized bodies toward a critical reimagining of gendered embodiments and experiences, and an in-depth reflection about what the consequences of such a turn may be in the sociopolitical and academic realms. In line with this tradition, Prada reasons that *Mujer T* is important because of the impact it will have on the recognition, representation, and advancement of all women, cis and trans alike, especially in the Colombian context. Prada is well aware that, taking into account the history and popularity that beauty queens have in the country, the social, political, and symbolic impact of pageants should not be underestimated.

Beauty pageants have a powerful hold on the Colombian social imaginary. The first *Concurso Nacional de la Belleza* (National Beauty Pageant) took place in 1934. But *el reinado*, as it is commonly called, is only one of the estimated three hundred pageants that take place each year in the country (Stanfield 2013, 1). They are varied in nature and scope. Most are for young women, but there are some for girls and older women too. Some take place in parks, others in fancy convention centers, and some others even in prisons. Only one names the official Miss Colombia, but many crown the queen of coffee, guava, pineapple, flowers, and so on. Pageants are sources of entertainment and regional and national pride; and in recent decades they have also become sites of controversy and reflection. Feminist scholars like Chloe Rutter-Jensen and Mara Viveros have edited important volumes that through rigorous and intersectional analyses provide nuanced insight into how national anxieties about race, class, and modernity often translate into seemingly unrelated standards of beauty (Rutter-Jensen 2005; Viveros, Rivera, and Rodríguez 2006). From this perspective, pageants are hyper-visible scenarios of the many ways in which deeply rooted sexism[3] and discriminatory yet naturalized racial and classed hierarchies—that (violently) model women's bodies and limit their opportunities—intersect in the female body. Prada's critique of *Mujer T* comes from within this historical and theoretical context. Her argument points to the ways in which the female body has been—and continues to be—objectified and put in the service of a patriarchal model of the nation in part through events like beauty pageants. By glorifying docile female bodies that willingly submit to multiple disciplining techniques to conform to the demands of the national ideology, these contests participate in the dehumanizing process of turning women into national and natural resources (Nasser de la Torre 2013, 308–309), and uphold the racial, class, and gender hierarchies of the status quo.

A Trans Elephant in the Room

On her blog, and at the debate organized by Sentiido, Prada states her position about *Mujer T* clearly: the event lacks a critical gender perspective and goes against the

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needs of women in general, but perhaps especially the needs of trans women. Prada rightly worries about the negative impact that unrealistic, sexist, and racist standards of beauty may have for the physical and psychological well-being of trans women with scarce resources and little access to health services (Prada 2013).[4] She fears that events like this will put even more pressure on trans women—whether they are participating or not—to engage in bodily modifications that, if not done with proper medical supervision, could jeopardize their health (Prada 2013). Finally, Prada is also concerned about the symbolic impact of the event. She is preoccupied with the negative implications that *Mujer T*, as a pageant paid for and sponsored by the city, will have on the social imaginary: "What's the result for the social imaginary?. . . the idea that women are there to strut on display and be queens. That's the most perverse effect that these kinds of things have" (Sentiido 2013a).

Jessica Useche partially agrees, but underscores the differential meaning and impact these events may have for trans women. As I mentioned before, Useche is a well-known community leader who has served the mayor's office of Bogotá under different administrations and in various capacities. She began her intervention by saying that she could not have done any of these things if it hadn't been for her early involvement with pageants. She recognizes the validity of Prada's arguments, but in line with Marcia Ochoa in *Queen for a Day*, a landmark comparative study of *transformista* and cisgender beauty pageants in Venezuela, Useche sustains that, for trans women, the successful performance of femininity on and off the catwalk helps provide "legibility, affirmation, income, and other elements necessary for survival" (Ochoa 2014, 92). In trans pageants, Useche found the validation, affirmation, advice, materials, and encouragement she had been craving her whole life. She was able to experiment freely with her femininity, and be recognized—instead of chastised—by others while doing so. Useche anchored her speech in the impact that pageants have had on the construction of her career and her identity, which is inextricably tied to her bodily transformations and her need to have these recognized and celebrated. By bringing her own corporeality and experience into the conversation, Useche argues that one should not discount the transformative potential events like *Mujer T* may have for many trans women. Otherwise, Prada's concerns may be misinterpreted as disingenuous and condescending. Useche summarizes this position:

> The position of cisgender feminists is out of context here. Trans women feel insulted by these positions, because I hear feminist women tell trans women to be open to other options outside sex and the body, when it is precisely sex and the body that have been their life's constant challenge. (Sentiido 2013b)

Against this backdrop, critiquing the sexual objectification of women in events that prioritize physical beauty over intellectual or leadership skills is perceived as a blurring of the concrete meaning these events have in the construction of the identities of some trans women, and in their formative experiences.

Another important element that Useche brings to the fore is the socioeconomic and educational disparity underpinning the conversation about *Mujer T*. Like many

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other initiatives sponsored by the mayor's office during Equality Week, *Mujer T* is geared primarily toward vulnerable populations. Therefore, even though participants represent Bogota's twenty districts—which could provide socioeconomic diversity to the event—most contestants come from low-income backgrounds and have not graduated from high school. Many struggle to make ends meet by combining low-paying and unreliable jobs with sex work. For Useche, these gaps among participants, organizers, and critics create power dynamics that must be acknowledged and addressed:

> The feminist position comes from women who are well read, who are empowered in their discourse, and with whom trans women don't feel they're on equal footing. Or from gay men, who are very empowered in politics and public opinion . . . they have had a dominant position regarding the decisions made about trans women. (Useche 2015–2016)

Because of the disparity in social, economic, and educational backgrounds, the goodwilled advocacy intentions of women like Prada or city officials like Prieto—a gay man who, as Useche points out, often gets to make important decisions about LGBT policies in Bogotá due to his position in the mayor's office—can be seen as an exercise not only of politics and policy, but of policing. Useche's comments highlight the frustration she and other trans women feel about the way in which discussions about them are held in many academic and public policy spaces. Too often they are asked to wait and listen while others converse about their needs and rights. Even though trans women are physically present, their voices are sidelined and diversity ventriloquism prevails. This dynamic was painfully evident during the debate itself. Even though Useche was the only trans woman at the table, Prada and Prieto dominated the conversation. Useche was the last person to speak, received the fewest questions, and overall spoke less than the other two guests. In this sense, one of Useche's observations illustrates diversity ventriloquism at work: "it was like a group of nineteenth-century scientists talking about elephants, where everyone got to have an opinion except, of course, for the elephants" (Useche 2015).

Useche's remarks show the imbalance of power that underlies many public-policy and academic conversations about trans inclusion and advancement, allow us to see the ambiguous position that trans women still occupy in the spaces that seek to include them, and highlight the systemic disruption that people with trans life experiences still embody in both academic and policy worlds. Charlotte Schneider, an important community leader and proud winner of several crowns, underscores this tension in her response, posted on Facebook, to Nancy Prada, during the debate:

> We trans women are read as dangerous. We are associated with criminal or delinquent acts, but we're also stigmatized for wanting to be hyperfeminine. We're accused of being stereotypical and reproducing everything that feminists reject. (Schneider 2013)

Schneider's remarks echo Julia Serrano's denunciations of the misogyny embedded even in LGBT and ally circles. In her work, Serrano has argued that expressions of femininity are often belittled and regarded as either frivolous or ignorant in LGBT

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and feminist spaces. The debasement of femininity imposes an additional burden on feminine trans women who have their "feminist credentials constantly called into question by those who view femininity as an artifact of compulsory heterosexuality and, therefore, inherently conformist" (Serrano 2012, 179), and it places many trans women in a double bind: "if they act feminine they are perceived as being a parody, but if they act masculine it is seen as a sign of their true male identity" (Serrano 2007, 49). Schneider, like Serrano, makes an appeal to respect the whole gamut of trans women's gender expression and embodied experiences of femininity, and underscores the empowering potential that initiatives like *Mujer T* have. She therefore defends *Mujer T* not only as an event, but also as a pageant:

> Yes, *Mujer T* is a pageant, and even if they're labeling it an event, for me it is still and will continue to be a pageant, but a different kind of pageant, because it is immersed in a process rooted in trans experience that aims for, and has, clear political, social, and cultural commitments, first of all because it takes a cultural and artistic practice related to trans bodies, settings, performance, and corporeality from "ghetto" places, since it won't be held in a LGBT bar or disco, or in a whisky bar, brothel or other establishments where some of us trans people have worked as prostitutes or do so today, and it puts us in a public space, a State-run theater, the Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. This, in my view, has a symbolic power, a social and political power, because for the first time trans women are occupying a space in the government that's recognized by a large portion of the citizens of Bogotá and is part of the city's cultural and artistic heritage. And there we'll be showing off our artistic and cultural expressions, our bodies. Does Dr. Prada know how many trans women have access to spaces like that to exhibit art and culture? (Schneider 2013)

Schneider focuses on what she sees as the positive outcomes of *Mujer T* for the social imaginary in relation to the perception not of all women, but specifically of trans women. *Mujer T* takes cultural practices of great importance to the trans feminine community in Bogotá out of the underground, and by placing them in spaces of established historical and cultural significance contributes to their legitimization. Like Useche, she insists on the role these events have within the trans feminine community, and highlights their benefits for many trans women.

With the above, I do not mean to deny the realities of sexism and hetero-cis-normativity that underlie beauty pageants, nor to praise those events as the only instances of empowerment for trans women. In this sense, I share the clarification Ochoa makes when analyzing the role cis and transgender beauty pageants play in the configuration of Venezuela as a modern state: "Let me be clear: I am not proposing frivolity as a redemptive political tactic; I am showing how it becomes a site for the negotiation of power" (Ochoa 2014, 238). *Mujer T* is only one—fraught, imperfect, and evolving—space where some trans women see potential for individual affirmation, social recognition, and political engagement. Moreover, as I mentioned at the beginning of the article, the most important legacy of the debate about *Mujer T*

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2013 lies in the questions it raises for public policy, contemporary feminisms, and trans activism, and in the strategies for political engagement and social recognition it has mobilized since then.

"Why Is a Gay Boy Going to Tell Us How to Run Our Own Show?" Moving Away From Diversity Ventriloquism

When *Mujer T* was over, many trans women expressed their frustration with the way the event and the conversations around it were conducted. Whether they initially supported the event or not, they were united in their discomfort with the way things were handled and demanded structural changes. Echoing Useche's comments, they got tired of being the big trans elephant in the room and decided to put an end to diversity ventriloquism. They acknowledged and praised the efforts of the administration but highlighted that they were often insufficient and misguided. Therefore, one of their first demands was to be an active part of the process leading up to the next *Mujer T*. The administration listened, and in 2014 formed an organizing committee with at least four characteristics worth noting. First, six out of the seven members of the committee were trans women.[5] Unlike in 2013, trans women were a key part of the planning and decision-making team in 2014 and 2015, and it was primarily they who mobilized their communities, proposed ideas, and carried them out with the technical support of the mayor's office. In this way, trans women were the ones speaking for what their community wanted, needed, and expected from government institutions, and not the other way around. Second, the members of the committee were representatives of key offices (*secretarías*) within the administration.[6] This has allowed *Mujer T* to become a space where conversations about different aspects of the lives, cultural practices, and needs of trans women can take place, and processes of coordinated institutional action can begin. For example, the *Secretaría de Salud* (Office of Health) now actively participates in the event not only by providing information about public, trans-friendly health care but also by recruiting participants to work full time in the formal sector.[7] The involvement of the Office of Health is one of the most interesting aspects of the event for many contestants, since it addresses two main concerns for trans women: access to medically accurate and culturally sensitive healthcare, and employment. Third, the committee made significant efforts to incorporate feminist criticism of beauty pageants and build sociopolitical empowerment from a trans-feminine-affirming space. At first this may sound like an oxymoron. Perhaps for some readers it can be hard to imagine how an event that includes so much makeup and laser hair-removal can bring about communal empowerment and positive changes in the social imaginary. However, through the work of trans women and city officials (which include cisgender men and women, both gay and straight) committed to *Mujer T*, these contradictions and tensions are creating unique opportunities. Slowly, the political and social aspects of the event are gaining priority over its aesthetic components.

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Several changes implemented in the last two years substantiate this claim. For example, in an effort to combat the normalizing, racist, and sexist stereotypes associated with beauty pageants, the guidelines written in 2014 explicitly declare: "the reproduction of stereotypical beauty standards or bodily modifications that idealize a specific aesthetic are not part of the selection criteria" (Alcaldía 2014, 6), and openly encourage the "participation by women with different kinds of looks … [and it] allow[s] for participants' physical and aesthetic diversity" (2). Continuing with this inclusive line, in 2015 the event removed the age cap for participants, making it possible for all trans women, eighteen or older, to enroll.

The discourse surrounding the event has also changed considerably. Even though most trans women call it a *reinado* (the Spanish word for pageant, something the mayor's office has refused to do since 2013), both the official guidelines and the participants describe *Mujer T* primarily as a space of empowerment and recognition, an event that "promotes … the strengthening [of trans women] as political subjects [and] fosters participation in educational activities about rights [and] participatory democracy" (Alcaldía 2014, 7). To do this, participants now have workshops about their political rights and guidance on how to exercise them as part of the training leading up to the event. Through workshops and talks, candidates get the information needed to successfully navigate the many *secretarías* of the government to access social services or submit claims in case their rights are violated. Knowing that this process can be overwhelming, the committee introduces participants to key people in strategic *secretarías* so that, if they are having trouble with an issue, they know who to call or what specific office they should go to. As of 2015, candidates have also been provided guidance about how to change their names and sex markers in their official documents. It is worth noting that these workshops are as important as dance rehearsals and dress fittings because they influence the outcome of the event. Contestants now undergo a thorough round of interviews the day prior to the gala ceremony. The interviews revolve around their community engagement, knowledge of their political rights, and overall contributions to the well-being and recognition of trans women in the city.

Finally, the changes in programming and discourse have come together with a series of small but effective modifications that have boosted participation and assured continued enrollment. Lead by the committee, changes in schedules and venues have made it easier for more trans women to attend; and the implementation of material accommodations, like providing food at all activities, as well as a modest transportation stipend, have increased the interest in *Mujer T* and allowed participants to stay committed throughout the process.

It has not been easy. As Sergio Soriano, the only cisgender person in the organizing committee in 2014, explains, it has required many hours of active listening from all participants, particularly from cisgender gay men like himself who were used to making decisions on behalf of trans women and other underrepresented members of the LGBT community in the administration:

> After 2013 trans women were rightly upset. They wanted to be heard. They were very assertive and did not trust us [the mayor's office]. They

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> said to me, "why is a gay boy going to tell us how to run our own show? We're the ones who know how to do this, we should be the ones doing this." They were right. We listened. Together we changed the way things worked, we're still changing them. (Soriano 2015)

Despite the difficulties, through the commitment of many trans women and the mayor's office, *Mujer T* is slowly becoming a more inclusive, collective, and effective space of empowerment and social change.

But even with these modifications, *Mujer T* continues to be contested terrain. As of September 2016, trans women like Madonna Lozada were advocating for having the event removed from Diversity Week. In a Facebook post on the page of Juan Carlos Prieto, Director for Sexual Diversity of Bogotá, Lozada argued that despite the positive changes the event still reinforces harmful stereotypes about trans women and femininity more broadly, and pitches an already divided community against itself by making trans women compete for resources and services that should be guaranteed to all of them (Lozada 2016). However, it is worth noting that the visibility of these issues and the empowerment with which trans women like Lozada are now directly engaging public officials is at least in part a result of *Mujer T*. Today the future of *Mujer T* is uncertain, but the way in which the event got city officials, feminist scholars, and trans women working together to address concerns about the objectification of women, institutional misogyny, transphobia, and the many struggles trans women face daily in Bogotá is a success in its own right. Furthermore, as it stands today, *Mujer T* is a tangible—if imperfect and evolving—case of transing, not only of a pageant, but, more significantly, of the methodology and perspective that inform trans inclusive policies in Bogotá.

No Ordinary Pageant: Toward Trans-Inclusive Policies and Methodologies

When I started writing this article I was extremely suspicious of *Mujer T*. As a cisgender, feminist, Colombian woman who works in academia in Washington, D.C., I have spent most of my personal and professional life rejecting and trying to dismantle patriarchal notions of femininity that debase and subordinate women, particularly in strongly gendered cultures like that of Colombia. Therefore, the notion that a pageant could empower women and raise political awareness seemed ludicrous and naïve. The fact that the pageant was for trans women made me even less receptive to it. Along with Prada, I thought *Mujer T* put trans women in an even more vulnerable position by reinforcing the stereotypes and standards used to discriminate against and marginalize gender-nonconforming people. I still think this is true in most cases. However, as I hope to have shown, *Mujer T* is no ordinary pageant. As it stands today, *Mujer T* is different from other beauty contests for trans women like Miss International Queen—the largest and most prestigious of its kind that takes place every year in Pattaya City, Thailand—Miss Colombia Trans, and Miss Colombia Gay. All of these pageants follow the traditional model: conformity to (racist and

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ageist) standards of beauty and talent for showmanship are prioritized and rewarded; in these contests, there are no workshops on political rights, guidance on how to access social services like trans-inclusive health care, or information about how to successfully navigate government offices in order to get one's name and sex changed in official documents. In contrast, *Mujer T* is a hybrid space where different—and sometimes competing—notions of femininity, citizenry, and political engagement are being contested, reworked, and mobilized not in the name of beauty, but as part of a quest for opportunity, inclusion, and recognition that has to account for diverse embodied experiences that cannot be separated from the corporeal and material aspects that define them.

As a case study, the conversations around *Mujer T 2013* and its aftermath provide a window into how one of the biggest cities in the global South is navigating the tensions generated by its own inclusive policies, how Bogotá is renegotiating the contested terrain of femininity as it relates to the sociopolitical empowerment of trans women, as well as how it is reflecting on the reach and limitations of diversity and inclusion in the context of public-policy efforts geared toward advancing a trans-inclusive social-justice agenda. *Mujer T* has shown that feminist analyses of trans-inclusive policies from a critical gender perspective are important and should be heard. However, the dynamic and conversations about the event also pose urgent questions for contemporary feminisms. Some of the more pressing ones include: How can we acknowledge the desire for the successful accomplishment of femininity of many trans women—either because of personal preference or as survival strategy—while incorporating feminist criticism of the politics of essentialized bodies as they play out in the continued objectification of women and in culturally enforced normalization and gender-role compliance practices? How can we bridge the gap between trans-inclusive feminist theory and praxis, particularly in contexts where feminist discourse is not readily available to many trans women and may even seem contradictory to their own —culturally inherited—ideas about womanhood, and/or may threaten their chances of survival? And, how do we avoid the "just add trans women and stir" approach to trans-feminism and instead find ways, or spaces, for transing feminism?

As I mentioned earlier, Namaste's insight that "the epistemological shortcomings of certain forms of feminist theory are causally related to their methodological choices" (Namaste 2009, 21) is key to understanding some of the arguments mobilized around *Mujer T* and can be further extended to the realm of trans-inclusive public policy. Namaste's idea that for feminism to truly include—and serve—trans women, it must reevaluate its methodological approach and assess the power dynamics within its own sites of knowledge-production, is crucial in the context of *Mujer T* and could have regional impact since many places are facing similar issues. The outcomes of *Mujer T 2013* encourage further research and public-policy initiatives that, as Alcoff suggests, talk with, and to, trans women (Alcoff 1991–1992, 23). Instead of being about or for trans women, these projects are planned, implemented, and analyzed with and by them. This will move us away from diversity ventriloquism and toward a "more equitable and just distribution of the ability to speak and be heard" (29). *Mujer T* also shows that disagreements are valuable and, if acknowledged and

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addressed through active dialogue and collaborative practices, can create meaningful change. With its many limitations and its uncertain and contested future, *Mujer T* is a case in point of what can happen when policy-makers, scholars, and activists step away from diversity ventriloquism and ask themselves "the most serious of questions: 'what do we *think* we are doing, what are we *actually* doing, and *why* are we doing it?'" (Bettcher and Garry 2009, 6). Ultimately, to refuse to rethink our methodologies, epistemologies, feminist practices, and community engagement from a transgender perspective that demands much more than an add-and-stir approach would be to miss out on the transformative and liberatory potential these transings offer to contemporary feminisms and public-policy efforts committed to the advancement of social justice worldwide.

Notes

1. Throughout this article I use the term *trans women* following the guidelines published by the organizing committee of *Mujer T 2014*. According to their definition, trans women include all women "who identify in different gender expressions or identities as *transformistas*, *travestis*, transsexuals, intersex, and other expressions of feminine trajectories" (Alcaldía 2014, 4).

2. Martínez 2014 is a case in point.

3. I use the term *sexism* instead of *machismo*—commonly used when referring to patriarchal notions and practices that undermine the feminine and privilege hegemonic masculinity in the region—because, as Latino scholars like Lionel Cantú have pointed out, the use of *machismo* localizes and racializes sexist practices that occur in many contexts, thus contributing to the othering of Latino and Latina men and women (Cantú 2009).

4. All sources originally in Spanish have been translated by Allen Young.

5. The members of the committee were: Charlotte Schneider Callejas, Diana Navarro, Diana Ardila Koop, Roxanna Miranda, Channel Callejas, Bibian Sofía Cáceres, and Sergio Soriano.

6. *Secretaría de Salud*, *Secretaría Distrital de Planeación*, and *Secretaría de Integración Social* (Alcaldía 2014, 4).

7. *Territorios Saludables* is a health initiative that focuses on several marginalized populations, including LGBTI communities. The program is a major contribution of *Bogotá Humana* since it incorporates gender and sexual diversity into the framework of public health-care services. The collaborative work between *Mujer T* and *Territorios Saludables* is one of the event's most notable achievements in the last two years. After *Mujer T 2014*, five participants were hired to work for the LGBT unit of *Territorios Saludables* (Soriano 2015–2016).

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