



Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory

Contested Sites

Patricia Elliot

DEBATES IN TRANSGENDER,
QUEER, AND FEMINIST THEORY

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Series Editor's Preface

Trans-positions, Fugitive Poetics and Educated Hope

Patricia Elliot's *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites* is a wonderful, and courageous example of what Samuel Chambers calls fugitive theory, of what Rosi Braidotti names transpositioning, and of what Bryan Reynolds terms transversal poetics. Transgender studies may be “arguably the newest of academic fields”¹ but its short history has been marked, as Elliot notes throughout her book, by rifts, battles, border wars, fissures, disputes, deep divides, schisms, divisive hierarchies, political minefields, dissensions, tensions, conceptual and political impasses, and fraught relationships. Transgender studies has proved, then, to be what Elliot calls a “contested site”. Rather than getting involved in further skirmishes or trying to put an end, once and for all, to the diverse disagreements, Elliot explores the wounds of transgender theory, not in order to heal them, but to, as she says, foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the “complexity, heterogeneity, and political diversity that exists”. Calling for more nuanced analyses of trans debates Elliot engages in fugitive theorizing.² Judith Butler, in the context of a discussion of her performativity, has said that “the point is not to enumerate the political consequences of a theory [...], but rather to show how a theory [...] is already at work in the exercise of political discourse (*theory can work in implicit and fugitive ways*)”.³ How theory works in an implicitly fugitive manner is by travelling between and across, traversing “fields, genres, or disciplines” (Chambers, 23). Elliot works in precisely this fashion by critically engaging debates and theorizing across multiple terrains, in and between transgender/queer/feminist studies as well as psychoanalytic theory with the express hope that her work will assist in the difficult process of transforming the current battlefield into a forum for open debate and dialogue.

1 Masha Raskolnikov, “Transgendering Pride”, *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 157–164, at 158.

2 Samuel A. Chambers, “Cultural Politics and the Practice of Fugitive Theory”, *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006): 9–32.

3 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997) 40 (Chambers’ emphasis).

A dictionary definition of a fugitive gives up two meanings. Fugitivity means both “to have taken flight from duty and to have been driven out, banished, or exiled” (Chambers, 23). As Elliot is most careful to remind us, trans and non-trans persons have very different stakes and investments in theorizing trans lives and subjectivities and her own experience has often been one where her work is routinely condemned as suspect because of her non-trans positionality. If Kate Bornstein can style herself as a Gender outlaw, perhaps we could say that in this text Elliot positions herself as a theoretical outlaw. She may have been exiled, in some sense, from transgender studies, but she still insistently practices a fugitive theory which is both critical and self-critical, deliberately crosses the border into trans-theorizing. If, as Chambers argues, “this sort of border-crossing proves necessary for our very existence as theorists” and “the disciplinary borders do little, if anything, to protect us, so it is in our own interests (intellectually and pragmatically) to encourage their erosion”, then Elliot is not exactly eroding borders. She doesn’t take flight from the fraught fields but rather enters them in order to transform them, to learn (and subsequently teach others) by engaging the various debates. The process is as she admits, both one of learning and *un*learning, undoing and redoing, undoing some oppositions and challenging (but not suturing over) others. The fugitive politics she practices is a coalitional one as she tries to encourage discussion between diverse communities, aims for a solidarity between trans and non-transpersons without soldering them together. And she is very clear that her “fugitive theory will only be able to survive if [trans and non-trans] colleagues outside the discipline ... are willing to shelter it and protect it—which means, of course, to practice it” (Chambers, 25). This methodology shares some affinities with Tim Dean’s ethics of “cruising as a way of life”. As Dean explains it, in the context of the subculture of barebacking, “cruising entails a remarkably hospitable disposition towards strangers ... exemplifies a distinctive ethic of openness to alterity”.⁴ Elliot’s ethics of (un)becoming similarly entails a hospitable embracing of strangeness in ourselves as well as the strangeness of others (Dean calls this stranger love). While Dean as insider is concerned to argue for the exemplarity of barebacking in ethical terms, Elliot as outsider is concerned to demonstrate how the ways in which transpersons are differently embodied challenges existing conceptions or inscriptions, in Butlerian terms, of the normative, the intelligible, and the human. She is advocating, she tells us, for the cultural and political intelligibility of forms of what Nikki Sullivan

4 Tim Dean, “Cruising as a Way of Life”, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 176–212, at 176.

calls (un)becoming other, what Fintan Walsh has recently dubbed “an ethic of fragilization”.⁵

Elliot’s final pair of chapters both make a convincing case for the usefulness of psychoanalysis—mostly in its Lacanian versions—for understanding the role of psychic life in trans-embodiments. However, her fugitive approach actually shares some common space with the post-Lacanian psychoanalysis of Bracha Ettinger⁶ who in her book *The Matrixial Borderspace* suggestively discusses transsubjective connections, “instances of co-emergence and co-fading” (167) which “open lane[s] of fragility” (167). Ettinger also theorizes a “joining-in-difference with others” (181–182) predicated on a “fragile, fragmented, and dispersed mode of co-becoming” or we might now say (un)becoming. This surplus of fragility makes way for what Ettinger describes as “transcription” (167) or “cross-scription” (168) an “embodied potentiality” (181) which can only be actualized in a borderlinking and bordersharing ethical relation (Walsh, 187). Elsewhere, Ettinger calls this fragilized ethics a “borderswerving” (181) and this, perhaps, best captures Elliot’s ethical position as she grapples with the unconscious dynamics at work in trans subjectivization. This might become clearer if we place two quotations from Butler’s *Undoing Gender* side by side. Firstly, Butler, talking about an excess of fragility or of vulnerability says that: “it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable”.⁷ Secondly, Elliot quoting Butler as she outlines her own ethical responsibilities and political commitments: “a nonviolent encounter with others requires an acceptance of one’s own ignorance about the other, and a willingness to question and expand one’s conception of humanness” (*Undoing Gender*, 35–38). An “ethics of transmogrification”, another concept borrowed from Nikki Sullivan, is, then, an alternative ethical practice “based on confronting threatening responses to others and acknowledging the vulnerability that ensues from that confrontation”. Elliot’s ethics of recognition and of ethical encounters with others is one not so much of undoing as redoing.

This ethical task is one we cannot ignore with the increased bio-politicization of all bodies, not just trans bodies. But, it must be admitted that, as Elliot laments, violent norms and expectations cluster around the embodiment and the mental and physical well being of transpersons in ways which don’t necessarily impinge on non-trans subjects or on questions to do with their gender and their sexuality. Erin Manning has recently argued for a shift from biopower to the

5 Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

6 Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006).

7 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004) 28–29.

biogram and we might see a resonance between that move and Elliot's ethics of transmogrified subjectivity and of mutual enmeshment and vulnerable entanglement.⁸ Manning claims that "biograms ... introduce new ways of composing a body" (124) and that "to biogram is to create a virtual resonance that expresses the conjunction between series that prolong what a body can do. Not what movement *is*, but what movement can *do*." (126). Further, she argues that "the biogram constitutes active points of creation and potentiality through which body-worlds emerge ... the biogram is not actually *in* time or *in* space: it is a force through which the imperceptible appears as a feltness of time-spacing" (126-127). This also resonates with what Karin Sellberg has theorized as "transspatiality"⁹ and Jen Boyle has called "*transtime*".¹⁰ Transtime is a fugitive time which moves across, "cutting back, toward and forward simultaneously" (49). Boyle tells us that "queer moments and disjointed embodiments leave open other potentialities of thinking and feeling *in* time, *with* time, *through* time; and this, in turn, leads to attention to those models of temporality that serialize and normalize our conceptual engagement with bodies left in and out of history" (52). Elliot similarly—transtemporally and transdisciplinarily—argues that respect for others necessitates "recognizing their different experiences as well as those aspects that are shared" (Ettinger's jointness-in-separation) and she turns to Lacanian psychoanalysis, finding promise in its eschewal of the dichotomous logic of normal/pathological and the ways in which it promotes "psychic freedom needed to make choices that enable livable lives". This freeing up of psychic space also opens a gap for (un)becoming or, for Manning, "body-becoming": "biogrammatic movement ... is a thrownness felt as the preacceleration of a body-becoming" (127). She explains: "Incipient movement preaccelerates a body toward its becoming. The body becomes through forces of recombination that compose its potential directionalities" (6) and "the dynamic form of a movement is its incipient potential. Bodies are dynamic expressions of movement in its incipiency. They have not yet converged into final form" (6). Trans subjects are, as we have seen, vulnerable and precarious, always becoming with, in relation to, others and Manning proposes "that we move toward a notion of a becoming-body that is a sensing body in movement, a body that resists predefinition in terms of subjectivity or identity, a body that is involved in a reciprocal reaching-toward that in-gathers the world even as it worlds" (6). Elliot, in a trans-biogramatics, likewise proposes that trans

8 Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (London: MIT Press, 2009).

9 Karin Sellberg, "Transitions and Transformations: From Gender Performance to Becoming Gendered", *Australian Feminist Studies* 24 (March 2009): 71–84.

10 Jen Boyle, "Biomediality in the Time of Animation", *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 46–55.

and non-trans persons are involved in a reciprocal reaching-toward each other which “enrich[es] our mutual understanding and strengthen[s] our potential for solidarity”, potentializes new forms of being in the world.

In her chapter on (un)intelligibility Elliot persuasively argues that the human has always lacked the coherence and intelligibility “it pretends to possess” and she claims later that respect for others necessitates “recognizing their different experiences as well as those aspects that are shared”, dual projects which are reminiscent of the transversal politics of both Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari. As Gary Genosko says, “Together, Foucault and Guattari moved the consideration of transversality into the realm of struggles aimed at transforming the production of subjectivity away from inherited models” and toward “the production of new forms of subjectivity” (263).¹¹ Commenting on Bryan Reynolds’ “transversal critical practice” Genosko avows that “transversality is indexed to struggles against the status quo and to normopathic forms of subjectification” (264) just as Elliot’s ethics of (un)becoming is struggling against the current gender regime and normalizing/pathologizing forms of trans-subjectification. It is useful to read Bryan Reynolds’ “Glossary of Transversal Terms”¹² alongside Elliot’s chapters. For example, he defines “emergent activity” as “intervention within a cultural realm, describing new practices and ideas that emerge from a dominant framework, but become autonomous to it. Emergent activity hybridizes these twin operations to propose critical enterprises simultaneously stemming from a subject of inquiry and distinctly redefining it” (276). This is exactly what Elliot aims to do in *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites*, to take up a set of debates which have become difficult to dislodge and contest them, but in order to problematize rather than polemicize. Reynolds defines “Fugitive subjects” as those which “elude static definitions of social identity and self through subjunctive or transversal movements” (278), and his “becomings” or “comings-to-be” are closely aligned with Elliot’s (un)becoming trans subjects. “Fugitivity” Reynolds recognizes, as Elliot does (but we are ethically compelled to contest the status quo nonetheless) “is a dangerous process radicalizing the possibilities within the future” (278), but we must develop theoretical and subjective capacities which are “yoked not to a retrogressive past but to a future in which subjectivity is continuously and interactively involved in joyful and thoughtful stagings of its own reconfiguration” (Genosko, 270). Most appositely Reynolds’ glosses his key term “transversal poetics” as being “innovative and versatile as it emphasizes positive formulations of consciousness, desire, subjectivity, identity, expression,

11 Gary Genosko, “Afterword: Subjects that Matter”, in Bryan Reynolds, *Transversal Subjects: From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 262–271.

12 Bryan Reynolds, “Glossary of Transversal Terms”, in Bryan Reynolds, *Transversal Subjects: From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 272–289.

meaning, and so on. It is exploratory and malleable as it constantly reappraises its premises, influences, methods, contexts, and subject matters of inquiry to develop efficient modes of thought and action. It is collective and collaborative as it acknowledges as much as possible the conditions of its emergent activities: its histories, sources, and conversations” (287). This couldn’t be a more perfect description of Elliot’s transversal poetics which sees her engage with transgender theory, its history, its sources (Stryker, Namaste, Halberstam, Shildrick, Butler, Sullivan, Heyes, Stone, Bornstein, Wilchins, Prosser, Rubin, among others) and its conversations in order to develop more livable lives for trans persons. Her “fugitive strivings”—both a positive and a negative undertaking to be sure—make spaces in which “humans can flourish”¹³ and “If we continue to move transversally through the changes within and beyond our control, (r)evolutions can carry us to ever-more profound and positive becomings/comings-to-be” (*Zooz*: 245).

We might track some of the differences between the trans theorizations Elliot is contesting here by turning to the differend between one trans theorist (Judith Halberstam) and one non-trans theorist (Rosi Braidotti). The key difference between them is one of affirmative ethics or the political utility of hope. For Halberstam it is necessary to seek an alternative to the logic of futurity and for her hope is still tied to heteronormativity. So, she turns to a Nietzschean version of hope as the most evil of evils. An alternative ethics for Halberstam would mean losing hope (or at the very least loosening it from a heteronormative logic). Halberstam’s dream of an alternative way of being, of other situated forms of being/knowing, clearly differs from Elliot’s own dream of political hope. Like Elliot, Braidotti seeks to bring about an affirmative politics and a situated ethics, a radically immanent politics that would counteract political and theoretical melancholia. As with Elliot, Braidotti is all *for* the future, for dreaming an alternative, creative, sustainable ethics.

Indeed Braidotti’s *Transpositions*¹⁴ could productively be read alongside *Contested Sites* since they share both a commitment to transpositionality and to developing an ethics of (un)becoming. For Braidotti, “The term ‘transpositions’ has a double source of inspiration: from music and from genetics. It indicates an intertextual [or we might say transtextual], cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another” (5) and “it is thus created as an in-between space of zigzagging and of crossing: non-linear, but not chaotic; nomadic, yet accountable and committed; creative but also cognitively valid” (5). Elliot’s fugitive trans-disciplinarity makes similar “transposable moves” (6) and they

13 Zooz, “Continuous (r)evolutions: Thermodynamic Processes, Analog Hybridization, Transversal Becomings and the Post-human”, *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 235–246, at 245.

14 Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

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both clearly depart from Halberstam since “transposition is a scientific theory that stresses the experience of creative insight in engendering other, alternative ways of knowing” (6). Braidotti makes this explicit when she confesses that: “A kind of *amor fati* motivates me, not as fatalism, but rather in the pragmatic mode of the cartographer. I am seeking modes of representation and forms of accountability that are adequate to the complexities of the real-life world I am living in. I want to think about what and where I live—not in a flight away from the embodied and embedded locations which I happen to inhabit ... *Transpositions* enacts this notion by proposing creative links and zigzagging interconnections between discursive communities which are too often kept apart from each other” (7). Elliot too is motivated by a kind of *amor fati* as she is concerned about the complexities of trans lives, about the well being of transpersons, is moved to fashion a “transformative ethics” (Braidotti, 8) and to bring discursive communities (trans, feminist, queer, psychoanalytic) which are all too often sealed off from one another into productive dialogue. The impetus behind Braidotti’s project sounds remarkably similar to the present one: “transposing between the cartographic and the normative, this book will ask time and again: “So what, then? *What if the subject is ‘trans’,* or in transit, that is to say no longer one, whole, unified and in control, but rather fluid, in process and hybrid? (9, my emphasis). The answer she poses to this key question is to imagine a radically immanent “ethics of sustainability” (10) by “transposing sexual difference” (44) and engaging in theoretical “transports” (189) so that “a new transversal subjectivity emerges” (189).

In her “Epilogue: Transmissions or Transposing the Future”, Braidotti provides us with the resources to answer potential criticisms of *Contested Sites* in advance. She says: “I want to defend transformations as transpositions of positive energy and forces, as a sustainable enterprise, not as a recipe for fashionable border crossing. The point is to achieve successful transformations by striking sustainable interconnections” (272). This commitment, which both books share, to “transfigured futures” (272) is a necessary one because “only the yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present. The sheer thinkability of the future is the necessary precondition for inhabiting creatively the present” (273). And Elliot’s book is all about social justice, about creating equitable futures, for everyone, for *all* subjects, not just trans subjects which is why she rallies for additional work on the part of non-transpersons. We are all, as Braidotti often reminds us, in this together. And we are in it “to construct horizons of hope” (276).

“Ernst Bloch has described Hope as ‘dreaming forward’. It is an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them” (Braidotti, 277) and in *Cruising Utopia* José Esteban Muñoz uses Bloch’s theory to create a potential opening in

queer thought, what he calls “a certain critical idealism”.¹⁵ Queer utopianism, for Braidotti, Muñoz and (I would argue) also for Elliot, means constructing Blochian “concrete utopias”. Muñoz explains that “concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope” and that they are indeterminate in both “affect and methodology” (3), an affective structure that “can be described as anticipatory”, as the not-yet (this should remind us of Butler’s ethics of precarity discussed earlier). Muñoz’s approach to hope as a critical methodology can, he says “be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (4), a differently queer time and place.¹⁶ In a recent dialogue with Lisa Duggan, Muñoz has more to say about educated hope and its pragmatic potentialities: “practicing educated hope is the enactment of a critique function. It is not about announcing the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be”.¹⁷ More stridently, he goes on: “We need hope to counter a climate of hopelessness that immobilizes us both on the level of thought and transformative behaviours ... hope is a risk. But if the point is to change the world we must risk hope” (279). Elliot’s book takes that risk.

15 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 2.

16 A reference to Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

17 Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue”, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19.2 (July 2009): 275–283, at 278.

Preface and Acknowledgements

My plans to write this book were put on hold twice: first in 2001 when my partner Graham Solomon died suddenly, and again in 2004 when my mother died. For me, as for many others, grieving produced the unsettling experience of living beside myself. It is an experience that has the potential to make one appreciate the fragility of life and how crucial it is to support each other in it, through it, and when necessary, out of it as well. Such encounters with human mortality sometimes give us excess energy to fuel our activity (I was hoping for that), and sometimes immobilize us (what I got). As a consequence, this book has been long in the making, and reflects a decade of thinking about another set of issues whose urgency can also be a matter of life and death.

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Introduction

Exploring Rifts in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theories

Debates surrounding the conceptualization and politicization of transsexing and transgendering have animated feminist, queer, and transgender studies since the early 1990s. Contemporary versions of these debates also fueled discussion at a recent Chicago symposium¹ where four prominent trans scholars addressed the impact of transgender studies on women's studies, gender, and sexuality studies. Aaron Devor (2006) described the importance of transgender studies for problematizing assumptions about bodies and identities and also for the continuing need to rethink sex/gender categories. Susan Stryker (2006b) argued that transgender studies offers a critique of heteronormativity, a reconceptualization of gender based on rethinking who counts as male or female, and the creation of new forms of legibility for trans identities.² Judith Meyerowitz (2006) suggested that transgender studies calls for an end to the hierarchy that values and legitimates "normative genders" while devaluing and delegitimizing "transgressive genders." And in a somewhat contrary vein, Judith Halberstam (2006) urged a more cautious approach to both legitimizing and stabilizing the non-normative gendering that trans represents. Her concern was that a monolithic concept of trans would only enable its exoticization and fetishization, thus undermining the ability of trans to *defy* stabilization and intelligibility.

1 *Trans/Forming Knowledge: The Implications of Transgender Studies for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies*. The Center for Gender Studies, University of Chicago, February 2006.

2 In 1997, Ricki Anne Wilchins wrote: "Who knows what to call transpeople these days?" (15). Given the diversity of those who identify as transgendered and/or transsexual, and the difficulties of the politics of naming, I use "trans" or "transgendered" to refer to anyone whose expression of gender disrupts conventional assumptions of the gender order and who identifies as such. This umbrella term is normally understood to include transsexuals, drag queens, transvestites, drag kings, intersexed persons and others who do not identify as women or men. I refer to transsexuals as those who usually seek hormones and/or surgery to live as men and women, and who identify as such. Some transsexuals identify as transgender, whereas others reject the term altogether (Namaste 2005). Like Wilchins, I realize that any term one chooses may offend some readers, despite the explicit intentions of authors to avoid offense.

One of the more poignant responses from the symposium's audience came from a transperson who exclaimed: "the more we understand who we are, the more society seems to be getting confused." This comment was both amusing and instructive: amusing because it offered a critique of the perhaps overly academic language wielded by some of the presenters to discuss what s/he took to be a more straightforward matter, and instructive because the "confusion" attributed to society does indeed reflect a lack of consensus on several key questions. These questions include: What does trans studies represent today? How does it interact with queer and feminist theories of gender, sexuality, and embodiment? What challenges does it pose and what are its limitations? What tensions exist between transgender and transsexual persons, discourses, and practices, and what is the relationship of feminist and queer theory to these tensions? Should trans identities be legitimized or is it better that transpersons remain, as Halberstam proposes, "unintelligible," as a way to resist incorporation? If non-normative embodiments are to be celebrated only in their unintelligible forms, what becomes of those who embrace more conventional or intelligible gender categories?³ If we are always partly unintelligible, never fully conscious agents of our own desire, then what can be learned from addressing the unconscious dimensions of trans identities and embodiments? What is the effect on trans subjects of adopting discourses of biological determination rather than discourses that embrace a more complex interaction of body, psyche, and the social?

These questions suggest that the "confusion" observed by an audience member is not strictly due to a lack of understanding. Rather, it is the effect of a series of rifts that have opened up in the field, rifts that are created by divergent and competing positions. Divisions occur between, and sometimes among, advocates of what Judith Butler (2004: 4) calls "the new gender politics," advocates representing transsexual, transgender, intersex, lesbian, gay, and feminist groups. While Butler is clearly aware that these groups have their own history, she suggests that what is new is the way they interact with each other (both positively and negatively) to create trouble for the gender order. Paying attention to these interactions is important if we hope to validate the confusion some persons have observed, reveal potential obstacles to collective political action, and indicate differences that need to be addressed. Some schisms have emerged as a result of the impact of transsexual, transgender, and intersexed lives and theories on more established gay/lesbian, queer, and feminist theories.

3 This question is not new. It has appeared in different contexts since the 1990s. Martin (1994) raised it in relation to the celebration of queer, Namaste (1996) raised it explicitly with respect to transsexuals, and Holmes (2008) raised it in the context of intersex persons. It has become central to the rift between transgender and transsexual persons.

EXPLORING RIFTS IN TRANSGENDER, QUEER, AND FEMINIST THEORIES

Others have emerged as the result of asserting specificities and differences. Key rifts to be explored here reflect divergences in theoretical and political concerns, in disciplinary allegiances, and in discourses of gender and sexuality. They also reflect different relationships to the question of human rights reform, the role of the state, the value of inclusion in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) struggles, and to the purported inclusivity of the concept of transgender.

Key rifts to be discussed in this book include the following: divergent conceptions of trans subjects held by non-trans feminists; divergent and hierarchical relationships between transgender and transsexual persons; divergent and conflicting claims about gender intelligibility; divergent emphases on sameness and difference in theorizing trans experiences and identities; and divergent attributions of gender and sexual embodiment to nature and to psycho-social factors. While the existence of these rifts may reveal that the presumed solidarity of “the new gender politics” is more imaginary than real, ignoring them threatens to undermine the collective potential to resist marginalization and violation. My primary goal is to explore these rifts, not in order to mend them (although efforts for and against mending will be examined), but in order to foster a better appreciation for the complexity, heterogeneity, and political diversity that exists. But why should non-trans feminist and queer theorists be concerned about these rifts, and what is at stake for them in engaging with the field of transgender studies?

In the widely cited prophetic image that has come to mark the beginnings of what is now called transgender studies, Sandy Stone (1991: 294) depicts the clash of complex bodies of theory and experience: “we find the epistemologies of white male medical practice, the rage of radical feminist theories and the chaos of lived gendered experience meeting on the battlefield of the transsexual body: a hotly contested site of cultural inscription, a meaning machine for the production of ideal body type.” Although much has changed since the early 1990s, the transsexual body remains a battlefield; only the kinds of battles taking place on it have diversified. Debates about transsexuality have engaged both trans and non-trans theorists of gender and sexuality in complex ways, and are far from being settled. With respect to feminism, transsexuality has been variously described as: a betrayal of feminist goals (Raymond 1979); “the next logical phase of feminism” (Bornstein, cited in Nataf 1996: 44); or like feminism, one example of “gender dysphoria” (Califa 1997: 6, Devor 1997: xxvii). Queer theorists find themselves similarly aligned both for and against trans in ways that promise alliance on one hand and “erasure” (Namaste 1996, 2000) on the other. At stake in these debates is the question of whether the knowledge and the material conditions needed to secure the well-being of transsexuals and transgendered persons will be fostered or undermined. Inextricable from this more obvious matter of the particular lives of transsexual and transgender

people are broader social and political questions concerning: the relationship of legal, medical, and social institutions to those persons; the meaning(s) of trans embodiments and identities; assumptions about gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation; the provision of access to hormones and sex reassignment surgery; and conceptions of agency, rights, and location of decision-making power. Clearly, non-trans feminist and queer theorists and activists have long-standing investments in many of these questions, investments that have been recently challenged by the theory and activism of transpersons and by the increasing politicization of trans issues.

Sadly, the “rage of radical feminist theories” described by Stone (1991: 294) with reference to Janice Raymond’s (1979) hostile response to transsexuality has not entirely disappeared. It reappears in various theoretical positions, political practices, and attitudes and has caused a major rift among feminists, as well as a good deal of pain for transpersons.⁴ In critically engaging debates in and between trans, queer, and feminist studies, my hope is to assist in the transformation of the battlefield into more of a forum where various theories and perspectives may be heard, where the production of meaning is neither decided in advance nor dismissed out of hand, and where the key but often conflicting views of trans people may be given the serious consideration they deserve. Perhaps by virtue of what trans and non-trans authors have accomplished, the trans body has already become one possible site for exploring the chaos of our collective experiences of gender that Stone suggests can never be ordered, solved, or settled. It is a site worth exploring because learning about the lived experience and identities of transpersons enables non-trans persons to rethink the relationship of bodies and identities beyond the parameters of existing queer and feminist theory, a relationship that is sometimes taken for granted.⁵

4 A trans friend reported attending a GBLT film festival in 2008 where feminist presenters promoted transgender as “the new paradigm,” and denounced transsexuals who utilize medical means to transition as “misogynistic, self-denying morons.” Unfortunately, this is not an exceptional instance, and I include it here as evidence that feminists have not adequately come to terms with transsexuality.

5 My concern here is not to create a sense of guilt in those who prefer more normative expressions of gender (feminism does this quite well already). Without condoning power differentials or abusive gender relations, the point is to create a better understanding of other preferences, and other expressions. I do not seek to assign blame to those who manage to negotiate sex/gender congruity more or less easily, but to foster an awareness of how that negotiation is neither natural nor universal. Those who experience some form of incongruity, whether it is welcome or unwelcome, are unfairly disadvantaged as a result of normative claims to the natural. Demanding accounts of one’s process of negotiating sex/gender from either trans or non-trans persons seems futile given that much of this process is unconscious or otherwise beyond one’s control. Descriptions of those processes, however, are both interesting and valuable.

According to Susan Stryker (2004: 212), transgender studies is born of sexuality studies and feminism, and like its “evil” sibling, queer theory, has much to offer both. It is a field that documents the “subjugated knowledges” of and about transgender persons, knowledges that have been either buried, devalued, or erased (Stryker 2006a: 12–3). It also develops theories of embodiment, sexuality, and gender, as well as legal, social, and political theories concerning the *regulation* of gender expression and embodiment. Most important, perhaps, is Stryker’s (2006a: 3–4) insistence that transgender studies, “far from being an inconsequentially narrow specialization dealing *only* with a rarified population of transgender individuals, or with an eclectic collection of esoteric transgender practices, represents a significant and ongoing critical engagement with some of the most trenchant issues in contemporary humanities, social science, and biomedical research.” In a similar vein, Jean Bobby Noble (2006a: 2) argues that feminism must include an analysis of trans. Even though some trans, feminist, and queer theorists aggressively police attempts to engage trans studies on the part of non-trans persons, Stryker and others (Towle and Morgan 2006) are more emphatically in favor of doing so. Because my own engagement with trans theory has been repeatedly contested over the last decade, I have given this matter a good deal of thought in terms of the different stakes involved, the politics of non-trans feminist inquiry, and the relevance of engaging a theoretically based cultural analysis.

Trans and non-trans persons have enormously different stakes in the debates that traverse the newly designated field of trans studies. Although I do not believe this fact warrants the silencing of non-trans perspectives it sometimes produces, acknowledging those different stakes is a crucial matter. Grappling with these debates remains primarily a theoretical concern for non-trans persons like me—which is to say, for those whose personal integrity and material well-being are not affected by their outcome. Obviously, those who cross or change sex have much more at stake in how issues that carry personal and political consequences for them are addressed or not addressed. Many have been subjected to transphobic attacks by both trans and non-transpersons who could have been allies instead.⁶ Lacking insider expertise is a disadvantage here, and I am grateful for the formal and informal feedback on my research from a number of transpersons. I have learned that one advantage of being an outsider to both transsexual and transgender communities is the obligation it brings to consider how and where their respective needs and goals converge and how and where they differ. One not very modest goal in engaging the sexual politics of these debates is to foster critically informed support for anti-oppressive

6 Transphobia refers to expressions of fear and hatred of trans people, and takes multiple forms. It is a term widely used by trans authors and activists. For recent discussions, see Bettcher (2007), Shelley (2008), and Spade (2006).

strategies of social change at both personal and institutional levels. I also hope to avoid defensive subservience to the ideals of one faction of what is clearly a non-homogeneous movement.

Without abandoning those aspects of feminism or queer theory that I consider vital for challenging the ideology and structure of the gender order, I attempt to avoid prejudging those who struggle within it from positions other than my own. I make no pretense of being neutral, objective, or purely descriptive—fantasies of the privileged that have been rightly discredited. But I am committed to the view that non-trans feminists have something to learn from transpersons by engaging these debates. What we have to learn concerns not only the myriad forms of oppression affecting trans lives, but also, and intricately connected to this oppression, how their different embodiment challenges existing conceptions of the normative, the intelligible, and the human. Assuming we have the right to address these issues at all, what enables or justifies our engagements? What relationship exists or ought to exist between non-trans feminists and transpersons whose well-being depends a good deal on what sense gets made of their identities, their experiences, and their goals? What obstacles are encountered in engaging theoretical debates among us?

With Noble (2006a), I believe that taking the diversity of trans lives into account is necessary for the development of inclusive feminist and queer theories and practices. Useful to this end is the recent proliferation of both autobiographical and theoretical texts by trans authors which provide a context for non-trans others to participate in thinking about these issues and about the lives of those who have most at stake in how they are thought about.⁷ Thought-provoking films such as *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997) and *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) raise questions about the social status of trans children, and about the treatment and mistreatment of transpersons. Ongoing violence against transpersons, including but not limited to the internationally publicized murders of Brandon Teena and Gwen Araujo, highlight the urgent need for public awareness to alleviate the often violent repudiation of trans people.⁸ Widespread ignorance of trans lives both inside and outside feminist and queer communities enables a host of oppressive practices to persist, from differential access to hormones, surgery,

7 Research conducted by Denise Bates (2002) draws on sixty-four autobiographies published in English alone from 1932 to 2000, and others have been published since then. I am grateful to Bates for sharing ideas and research with me between 1997 and 2005.

8 Chris Shelley (2008) develops the concept of repudiation in relation to transphobia. For his summary of the murder of Gwen Araujo, see Shelley: 47–8. A long and interesting discussion of Brandon Teena appears in Halberstam 2005: 47–75. Remembering Our Dead is a website dedicated to documenting this violence (www.gender.org/remember/).

and other forms of health care to the criminalization of transpersons.⁹ In the Canadian context, Namaste's (2000, 2005) analyses of various institutional constraints on transsexuals' lives demonstrates the ongoing class and race bias inherent in these practices, even as their consequences extend to all trans persons. Namaste (2005: 27) argues that "the history of transsexual activism is forged to that of prostitutes ... Transsexual lives are ordered, governed, and controlled in and through the criminalization of prostitution." Moreover, both she and Mirha-Soleil Ross claim that transwomen suffer not only due to the poverty, homelessness, illness, and discrimination attendant on their lower socioeconomic backgrounds, but also as sex workers, in which work the majority experience violence that goes unnoticed: "For every Brandon Teena, there are a thousand TS/TV [transsexual/transvestite] prostitutes who were raped, stabbed, shot, strangled, beaten to death, burned alive, without ever having had a single book, documentary, or fiction film produced about them" (Ross, in Namaste 2005: 93). Trans studies scholar Trish Salah¹⁰ also draws a connection here between the silencing of transsexuals and that of sex workers; both are groups whose "right to speak for themselves is hotly contested, or flatly denied." Like Namaste and Ross, she suggests that some of the questions dividing transsexual and transgender discourses may well reflect their different relationship to sex work. Importantly, Salah observes that while "this axis of difference is not the only marker of class difference in trans communities ... an orientation towards sex worker rights seems to be a very strong indicator of a critical relation to human rights reform, appeals to the state and law, and a suspicion of struggles for LGBTQ inclusion and trans identity affirmation."

Explicit appeals to feminist and queer theorists to take trans experiences into account have been made by other transsexual and transgender theorists as well. While not as intentionally polemical or politically forthright as Namaste or Ross, and certainly less focused on the analysis of class differences, other trans theorists and activists nonetheless offer persuasive arguments for critically rethinking the assumptions that underlie gender privilege and the marginalization of trans persons. For example, Kate Bornstein (1994, 1998) repeatedly urges her readers to critically examine questions of gender, sexuality, and the treatment of sexual and gender minorities. And Jay Prosser (1998: 132) laments the fact that "transsexual autobiographies have been so unread in cultural theory ... that they hardly represent an official story in or beyond gender theory." The need

9 Funding for sex reassignment surgery was cut in the province of Ontario, Canada in 1998. It was finally restored in 2008. For a detailed discussion of these oppressive practices in a Canadian context, see Namaste (2005).

10 Personal communication, January 2010.

for further critical engagement with trans issues by those who care about social justice is clearly warranted, if politically fraught and much contested.¹¹

Despite the political difficulties involved in writing about groups to whom one does not belong, doing so is important for reasons I would describe as scholarly integrity, political commitment, and ethical responsibility. First, anyone who teaches courses on gender (as I do) has an obligation to address what is happening at and what is being pushed into the margins of the socially prescribed, heteronormative gender order. Anti-oppressive approaches to teaching gender and sexuality need to address trans lives in non-transphobic ways. Such approaches need to expose the consequences of insisting that conventional ways of doing gender are the only legitimate ones, consequences that include condoning violence against delegitimized others. Second, because non-trans feminist and queer theorists are concerned with how power circulates in the meaning, experience, and performance of gendered bodies, we are obliged to pay attention to contemporary challenges to configurations of gender. Trans writers and activists invite us to rethink the negative perceptions, attitudes, and practices that affect their lives, not simply to admonish, but also to end the ongoing prejudicial and violent responses to gender diversity that persists. Embracing transpersons' demands for recognition requires extending existing analyses of gender-based oppression to include the claims of marginalized others. Third, transpersons deserve to be taken seriously, especially by those whose work may have some bearing (directly or indirectly) on their lives. For non-trans feminist and queer theorists this means not only listening to and learning from transpersons. It also means thinking, writing, theorizing—all parts of a process of making sense of the challenges that trans experiences pose for the gender order as well as to other social, legal, medical, and state institutions.

If this argument in favor of feminist and queer inquiry into the meanings of trans is not always popular among trans or non-trans theorists, it may be because speaking about gendered embodiment and about what troubles its borders represents a threat, both to those who wish to preserve the current

11 Although it pales significantly in comparison with silencing and marginalization of the trans voices Namaste describes, the censorship of my own efforts in the late 1990s to address trans issues in an academic feminist community that had not yet taken them into account gave me pause. For example, why was the inclusion of theories about transsexual embodiment inappropriate for a feminist conference on the topic of gendered embodiment? How are anti-oppressive gender politics to be furthered if we can never address experiences other than our own? For me, the hostility of some non-trans feminists was tempered by the encouragement of others, as well as by the solicited and unsolicited support of some transpersons. This book is in some respects a response to both negative and positive encounters.

order, and to those who see themselves as outside of it. The stakes are high because meanings surrounding sex, gender, and embodiment remain unclear and contestable (not necessarily a bad thing). Because the lives of those who embody non-normative sex or gender depend, often quite literally, on what meaning gets made, the stakes for them are much higher than for others. I reiterate this point not only because it is crucial for non-trans persons to keep in mind, but also because it is a point that is difficult to take to heart when the vulnerability it signifies is not experienced first-hand. Understanding what is at stake helps to explain both the intensity of debates internal to the trans community, and the hostility that is sometimes directed to outsiders.

On the other hand, the widely held belief that you can never imagine what someone else experiences unless you find yourself in the exact same position is not only false, as Sandra Bartky (1997) so eloquently demonstrates, but it provides the very convenient excuse of never having to make the attempt. Like many dominant social views, this one ultimately serves the interests of the privileged. Here I agree with Stryker (2006a) that while outsiders need to account for their own positions and investments, their humility in the face of difference need not take the form of silence, as some advocate. This point was raised by Devor (2006) in his discussion of negative responses to his book on female-to-male transsexuals (Ftms) published prior to his transition, and the injunction to write only about oneself has placed me in a similarly awkward position. The power of identity politics attached to scholarly production means that my fellow non-trans colleagues can condemn my work as *prima facie* suspect, and that any position I embrace can be dismissed with impunity both by them and by those with insider status. While I have some sympathy for the latter's position, given that transphobia mars a good deal of non-trans research, I find the former's position to be self-serving, if not bordering on the paranoid.¹²

Another impasse in theorizing across feminist, queer, and trans terrains emerges from conflicting views about appropriate methodology, especially the often-contested, non-empirically based cultural analysis employed here. As this book is organized at least in part as a response to this impasse, and implicitly

12 The operative assumption here is that anyone's desire to write beyond the narrow parameters of their own personal experience must be motivated by some negative impulse: to enforce a hierarchy, to confirm one's own identity, to minimize or condemn others. One could argue, however, that the requirement to write only about oneself is just as likely to be fueled by these negative impulses. Another limitation here is that when it comes to recognition, identity politics creates a double bind. Recognition is demanded from others who are already deemed impotent to confer it, or whose power to confer it is read as inevitably demeaning. The cruelty of the effects of this double bind was made apparent to me by Trish Salah's (2007a) moving account of being caught up in it.

reasserts the usefulness of cultural analyses of transgender theory and politics, I briefly delineate the context that frames its conceptual organization.

Surveying the state of feminist politics at the close of the millennium, Lynne Segal (1999: 34) describes two main responses to encounters with differences of race, class, ability, and sexual orientation. The “outward looking” response involves, first, ensuring that formerly excluded or marginalized groups of women are not just included but are actively welcomed into feminist organizations; second, recognizing that separate organizing can be crucial for the development of a plurality of women’s voices and perspectives; and third, working both internationally and locally to foster the rights and well-being of all women, particularly the most vulnerable. The “inward looking” response to the encounter with difference focuses on the ways in which gender identity has been constructed, and whether its deconstruction is a desirable or even a viable project for feminism. Clearly, these two strands of contemporary feminism, the “outward looking” or anti-oppression activism, and the “inward looking” or the problematizing of identities, do not preclude each other, even though we are often asked to choose between them. Extending the purview addressed by Segal, I would argue that when queer, transgender, or feminist work fails to appreciate both of these strands, something vital is lost. Yet too often in debates among us, one strand is sacrificed to the other, resulting in the dreary yet familiar theory-or-activism split. Overcoming this split would be one of many steps needed for developing solidarity both within and between queer, non-trans feminist, and trans communities.

In one pertinent example of this split, Namaste (2000) argues that queer and feminist theorists have used representations of trans bodies to promote their own views about gender identity, while ignoring the material conditions of transgendered people’s lives. Whether or not this critique is just, Namaste herself advocates putting aside the question of identity to focus on “how transsexual and transgendered people live in the social, institutional, and cultural world” (2000: 56). I have no quarrel with Namaste’s outward-looking focus which contributes much to our understanding of the material conditions, history, and lives of her transsexual research subjects. But to jettison the question of identity implies that the social and political question of how to act in the world can be adequately addressed without asking how we understand our own and others’ identities. It implies that self-understandings do not inform our theories, our actions (or failures to act), or even our bodies, albeit in complex ways that require elucidation. To impugn feminists’ and queer theorists’ inward-looking focus on the personal and cultural meaning of transgender identities remains extremely problematic especially because it stifles a potential source of opposition to widespread and decidedly transphobic responses. While it is important to note that some feminists have found productive ways to engage with trans theory that do not merely “erase” trans realities, it is also true that

much transphobia remains within feminist and queer communities as well as in other, more mainstream ideologies and social practices of medical and psychiatric communities. In my view, analyzing trans theory and politics contributes to the ongoing work of making sense of trans lives with the understanding that cultural analysis and social activism are related, and that both are required for promoting the well-being of trans persons.

It should be clear by now that my decision to engage the theoretical debates among trans, queer, and non-trans feminist subjects instead of conducting empirical research with persons made into the objects of my inquiry is informed by a desire to make sense of the rich amount of theorizing that has been produced. The focus of the book reflects my personal investment, as a non-trans feminist, in promoting a reading of trans debates that advances non-trans feminist and queer understandings of and relations with transpersons. Accordingly, it is a reading that strives to accomplish a series of positive and negative tasks: to avoid assimilating, idealizing, or denigrating the forms of transition or body modification taken up by trans subjects; to accept the process of changing sex or gender without responding defensively to it, without projecting the monstrous on it, without dividing some forms from others in a hierarchy of worthiness; to value the diversity of trans lives that may reflect or contest normative subjective formations in ways that are informative for non-trans feminist and queer critiques of the gender order; to appreciate the complex psychic dynamics involved in altering one's body or assigned gender, not as a pathological rejection of norms, but as a way to construct inhabitable lives; and to question the attribution of trans or non-trans subjectivities to nature as a process that eclipses the complex relationships we all have to our bodies, as well as to the normative gender order in which those bodies are given meaning, even while those meanings are resisted. These tasks emerged in the context of writing separate chapters on the specific rifts I shall now outline, even though they now appear to be, and perhaps always were, inextricably interrelated.

In *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, and Imperialism*, Namaste (2005) offers a critical take on several issues I will be discussing in this book, including the question of whether non-trans feminists can be allies with transsexuals, and if so under what conditions. From my perspective, those non-trans feminists who hope to work with transsexuals in making social change through activist or theoretical contributions, or both, will do so out of a commitment to some shared goals, and not by virtue of possessing identical experiences or interests. One of these goals, however dismal the track record in achieving it, is to promote the well-being of women and of other subordinate groups by supporting anti-oppression movements, including those of sex workers. And despite sustained efforts on the part of Janice Raymond (1979) and Sheila Jeffreys (2003) to pit feminists against transsexuals, many of us have

argued that alliances with transsexuals are possible, even necessary, if we are to live up to our own political commitments.

Accordingly, in Chapter 1, I argue that the question of who gets to be a woman is one that feminists need to re-examine. I do so in light of a recent Canadian legal dispute over the exclusion of transwoman Kimberly Nixon from a rape crisis center where she sought the opportunity to volunteer. The eruption of this particular legal dispute demonstrates the inseparability of the two strands of feminist focus—women’s rights activism and questions of identity. Moreover, it demonstrates the need for further reflection on sex, gender, sexuality, and the body, especially in relation to transpersons. Namaste’s (2005) objections to my critical analysis of this case notwithstanding, some important feminist debates around trans issues do take place on the terrain of identity, and they have implications for precisely the kinds of anti-oppression work she advocates.¹³ As Butler (2004: 30) points out, the question of how one does gender ought not to be dismissed as a “merely cultural” issue, as it has “consequences for how gender presentations are criminalized and pathologized” as well as for how some people come to see themselves as entitled to disparage members of the trans community. Butler’s ideal of solidarity notwithstanding, the reality is that non-trans feminist and queer encounters with transsexuality are conflicted, and remain unresolved. What are the political and conceptual difficulties encountered in trying to think about experiences other than our own? Which ideas get censored and why? What questions do transsexuals raise about mainstream, feminist, or queer beliefs surrounding gender, identity, and embodiment? Can we accept that for some people sex changes, without feeling the need to vilify them? What tools do we have, and what do we need to acquire or to avoid using in developing or expanding our readings of the sexed/gendered body? Addressing these questions in Chapter 1 opens up the now-fraught question of who gets to be a woman and insists on its theoretical importance. Its ramifications obviously extend beyond the matter of including transwomen in feminist organizations to more deep-seated concerns with how feminism addresses differences with its others, including differences in understanding sexual politics.

Disturbing to many non-trans feminists is the growing rift I discuss in Chapter 2 between transgender and transsexual communities, and the concomitant view that non-trans feminists who support the former are poor allies for the latter. From Namaste’s (2005) perspective, transgender activists are the more privileged group whose politics is framed exclusively in terms of questions of identity using a feminist/queer theoretical framework. The problem as she

13 I read the question of who gets to be a woman as one originally posed by Kimberly Nixon, and one that non-trans feminists need to think about. I make no claim that this is the only question to ask, or that mine is the only response to it.

envisions it is not just that feminist and queer theorists feel an affinity with transgender criticisms of the gender binary, but that these criticisms are imposed by a minority of transgendered persons on the majority of transsexuals whose personal goals and politics lie elsewhere. Thus, the rift engaged in Chapter 2 concerns longstanding debates around what Halberstam (2005: 20) calls the problem of “transgressive exceptionalism,” a problem of competing claims by transsexuals and transgenders over who is the most oppressed or the most radical. A close reading of Namaste’s critique of transgender/queer claims of holding a more “radical” gender position than their transsexual counterparts is a crucial point of departure. These claims are then examined through an analysis of Butler’s (2004) reading of the diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID), and Halberstam’s (1998b) reading of the border wars between butch and Ftm identities. A central question this rift poses for me is whether it is possible to value the transgressive potential of transgender lives without disparaging the alternative desires and goals of those transsexuals who wish to live as women and men. Without presuming to resolve the deep-seated and ongoing antipathies that underlie this historically prominent fissure, I suggest that Henry Rubin’s research and more recent reflections by Halberstam offer some useful suggestions for bridging the divide.

Chapter 3 explores the question of intelligibility as it is differently conceptualized by a variety of trans, queer, and feminist theorists. Margrit Shildrick (2002) suggests that vilifying the monstrous other is an attempt to protect ourselves from vulnerability to what is uncertain or unstable in our sense of self. Threatened by the strangeness of the other, one response is to strengthen the boundaries between self and other, to disparage the other as somewhat less than human. One example of this response on the part of some non-trans feminists towards transpersons is discussed in Chapter 1. Another response is that of transgender theorists who embrace and reclaim the position of alterity, declaring an allegiance to the unintelligible. The third rift concerns whether or not the existing opposition between the human and/or intelligible on one hand, and the nonhuman and/or unintelligible on the other, can be or ought to be dismantled. To the extent that all queer and transpersons are considered threatening to the existing gender order (to varying degrees) and are relegated to the nonhuman and the unintelligible, this chapter addresses competing visions of what the relationship to that process of abjection ought to be. Should the category of the human be transformed, as Biddy Martin (1994), Naomi Scheman (1999), and Judith Butler (2004) have argued, or should the unintelligible be celebrated for their potential to oppose the status quo, as Halberstam (2006) and Noble (2006a, 2006b) argue?

At the same time, compelling analyses that recognize the desire at work in multiple forms of “(un)becoming other” (Sullivan 2006) have emerged. Such analyses complicate the issue of whether gender is or ought to be the

coherent basis for identity. In arguing for an “ethics of transmogrification,” Nikki Sullivan (2006: 562) suggests a way to overcome the oppositions that have been established between “the normal and the strange, between conformity and transgression, between being and becoming, and between self and other.” And Robyn Wiegman (2006) insists that the desire for gender is operative in all projects, including those that imagine they are queering, ending, or transcending gender intelligibility. The chapter therefore concludes by posing the question of whether, or to what extent, a more promising ethics might emerge from recognition of the basis of our mutual investments in being who we are, or in (un)becoming other.

A fourth rift opens up within trans studies around the question of how to think about similarities and differences between trans and non-transpersons at the level of embodiment, and that I address in Chapter 4. Both Aaron Devor (1997) and Jay Prosser (1998) could be said to risk addressing the psychic complexity of transsexual subjectivity, although Devor’s emphasis on similarities between trans and non-trans experiences and Prosser’s emphasis on their differences produce divergent discourses. Nevertheless, both authors provide insight into the refusal of transsexuals to reduce questions of embodiment to the purely social and their rejection of the assumption that “in a society that could tolerate lack of correspondence [between bodies and gender identity], there would be no transsexuals” (Kessler and McKenna, cited in Rubin 1999: 181). I argue that while there is some value in making the concept of gender dysphoria universal, as Devor does, Prosser’s analysis of the specificity of transsexual identity is even more important in facilitating a recognition of what is unique. His exploration of the psychic experience of transsexual embodiment echoes Rubin’s (1998a: 279) call to “find better ways to theorize the importance of our interiority.”

Understanding psychic life is also an issue for Devor’s research participants who do not reduce their experiences to social or biological considerations. For them, as for Prosser, the psychological dimension of embodiment needs to be taken into account. Committed to maintaining a role for psychoanalysis and the unconscious in theorizing body politics, I extend these insights into a discussion of sexed embodiment. What are the possibilities for and the obstacles to addressing psychic complexity, especially if that complexity produces the diversity that others attribute to nature? Despite the often fraught relationship between psychoanalysts and transpersons, I suggest that psychoanalytic theory provides a valuable tool for grappling with the unconscious dynamics at work in the process of trans-sexing as described by Prosser and by Devor’s participants.

In Chapter 5, I argue for the continued problematization of gender, sexuality, and sexed embodiment against those claims to “natural diversity” that threaten to undermine the complexity of human subjects and that leave the door open for transphobic practices. The rift here is between those who seek to attribute

gender diversity to some natural (genetic or biological) factor versus those who seek a more complex psychosocial account of the interrelations of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. What is at stake in the claim that nature is the cause of sexual diversity in humans? What are the advantages and challenges involved in adopting an alternative view, one that would understand human sexuality as an effect of inevitable but idiosyncratic drives mediated by social and psychic factors? Avoiding the hostility with which some queer and non-trans feminist theorists dismiss transsexual appeals to the natural, I nevertheless return to some of the criticisms of such appeals. Roger Lancaster's (2003) analysis of the widespread fascination with genetic determinism is a useful reminder of some of the pitfalls attendant on this perspective. My reading of the recently renewed controversy surrounding Michael Bailey's book (2003) offers an example of the damaging effects of biological reductionist discourse on trans lives. Finally, my analysis of the case of David Reimer (Colapinto 2000) demonstrates the recalcitrance of this discourse. Returning to a psychoanalytic perspective, I suggest that adopting a more complex psychosocial theory of embodiment, identity, and subjectivity offers a better understanding of David's struggle than the nature/nurture debate to which it is often reduced.

Respect for trans people requires serious engagement with their often competing theoretical positions, many of which challenge previous ways of perceiving questions of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. But serious engagement is also critical engagement, which means one includes points of disagreement rather than avoiding them. My own theoretical engagement has been deepened by the willingness of several trans and non-trans readers to comment on previous versions of my work. Their responses helped me address the insensitivities outsiders inevitably possess, and encouraged me to take risks that otherwise I might not have been able or willing to take. I have done this in the spirit of coming to terms with the limits of my own understanding, what Butler (2004: 35) calls one's "unknowingness about the Other." In her view, a nonviolent encounter with others requires an acceptance of one's own ignorance about the other, and a willingness to question and expand one's conception of humanness (Butler 2004: 35–38). These ethical guidelines may be more difficult to follow than one expects, but they remain valuable ideals nonetheless.



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Chapter 1

Feminist Embattlement on the Field of Trans

The relationship of non-trans feminists to transpersons constitutes a relatively new crisis in the way that differences with “others” are addressed, differences within what gets considered the collective identity of feminism and differences in our understandings of sexual politics. This chapter explores one of the contemporary struggles taking place over the meaning we make of these differences. I offer a specific example of what Sandy Stone (1991: 294) calls “the rage of radical feminist theories” and what I will call the disparaging view. At stake is the question of whether feminist efforts to end the marginalization, exploitation, and oppression of all women will be extended to transwomen as well. According to Judith Butler, feminism has been part of the new social movements that challenge normative restrictions on gender and sexuality, especially with regard to non-trans women. One interesting set of questions Butler (2004: 2–3) raises might historically have been asked by non-trans feminists of our own status as women:

If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the “human” expand to include me in its reach? If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live? Will there be a place for my life, and will it be recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence?

Butler makes a convincing case that groups involved in what she calls “the new gender politics”—feminist, queer, antiracist, trans, and intersex—share many common grounds in terms of overall political goals. As she (2004: 11) points out, these goals concern not just avoiding phobic attacks against bodies, but also “presumptions about bodily dimorphism, the uses and abuses of technology, and the contested status of the human, and of life itself.” However, if Butler is suggesting these as the basis for future coalition building, in a way showing that this potential exists, it is because it has yet to be wholeheartedly embraced. At the present time, her list of questions concerning the status of transgender persons can be posed to non-trans feminists. And if the need for persuasion is there, it is because large differences of opinion concerning the status of “others” continue to divide the non-trans feminist community.

The disparaging response of non-trans feminists to trans persons unfortunately tends to be associated with feminism as a whole, despite the existence of more promising feminist responses that have grown in popularity especially since the early 1990s. Associated with the early, transphobic work of Janice Raymond (1979) (whose views were reaffirmed in the subsequent 1994 edition), the disparaging response continues to find adherents among radical feminists of the women's movement (Nicki 2006; Sweeney 2004). Like those who oppose transwomen's participation in the Michigan Women's Music Festival, these feminists perceive transwomen's desire to participate in "women only" spaces as a threat to a well-guarded gender boundary.¹ Promoted by the polemical writer Sheila Jeffreys (2003), the disparager's perspective often exudes an unconstrained hostility directed at transwomen who are construed as enemies of women's liberation. It is therefore not surprising that other "women only" spaces, such as rape crisis shelters, should become the focal points for battles over the meaning and limits of gender identity. As will become apparent in my analysis of these battles, the central question here—who gets to be a woman?—arises from a politicization of feminine identity that has historical roots in the feminist movement.

Some 20 years ago, Jacqueline Rose (1986: 103) argued that we should consider the difference between "the idea of a political identity for feminism (what women require) and that of a feminine identity for women (what women are or should be)." If feminism is based on what women require, it involves an ongoing process of defining our needs in all our differences. Alternatively, if feminism is based on ideas about what women are or ought to be, then we become embroiled in interminable disputes over how to define who counts as a woman, and over what or whose criteria to employ. While it has always seemed to me that the former conceptualization provides a stronger, more inclusive basis for feminism, recent encounters of non-trans feminists with transwomen have made it more difficult to separate these two formulations, with the result that it may no longer be possible to separate the two, either theoretically or practically. It also seems that *problematizing* the question of identity—what it means to be a woman, a man, or some other identity—is not necessarily the same thing as *politicizing* the feminine, at least not in the narrow sense of prescribing who gets to be a woman. But it is difficult to make claims about what women require without having in mind a specific group of people, as recent claims for inclusion by transwomen make abundantly clear. One of the problems suggested by Rose's formulation, then, is the implication that working to meet women's needs somehow lets one off the hook of having to define

1 For recent discussions of the Michigan Women's Music Festival, see Boyd (2006) and Koyama (2006) who usefully discuss its racist dimensions.

who women are, or that the question of identity is somehow peripheral or secondary.

For those working at the Vancouver Rape Relief Centre in Canada in the mid-1990s, the question of identity became, and it continues to be, an extremely contentious issue. One of the oldest (if not the oldest) feminist organizations for sexual abuse survivors, Rape Relief has always been a much admired institution with a deserved reputation for defending women's lives and their rights. I have no desire to belittle the work carried out at Rape Relief, or to suggest it should not continue. My view is shared by Kimberly Nixon, the transwoman whose exclusion from that organization is at the heart of the legal dispute discussed in this chapter.² However, as the following discussion makes clear, the failure to recognize transwomen's claims to legitimacy challenges the political identity of the women's movement itself. That is, the case assumes a wider symbolic value for the meaning and self-understanding of feminism as it questions the goals of inclusivity and support for sexual minorities that many feminists deem indispensable to the movement.

Since 1995, the bitter legal dispute over whether Nixon ought to have the right to train as a counselor at the Vancouver Rape Relief Centre has raised questions about feminists' complex relationships to and assumptions about gender, sexuality, and support for diverse sexual struggles. When Nixon arrived for training as a counselor at Rape Relief, her credentials as a woman were questioned and she was told that despite having lived as a woman for 14 years, only women who were "born" women and socialized as such could work in that capacity. Nixon filed a complaint with the British Columbia Human Rights Commission (in 1995), argued her case before the Human Rights Tribunal, and won (in January 2002). Subsequently, a petition to the Supreme Court of British Columbia was filed by Rape Relief (June 2002) to quash the Tribunal's decision ("Petition to B.C. Supreme Court for Judicial Review") on the grounds that the Tribunal "erred" in several areas of judgment, including that it ignored "all of the evidence before it," a claim that is telling in itself. Rape Relief's petition met with success in December 2003, and an appeal (December 2005) was unsuccessful. Although Nixon sought leave from the Supreme Court of Canada to appeal the decision of the BC Court of Appeal in 2007, this request was denied.

2 Details of the Kimberly Nixon case were found on the web site of the Rape Relief Centre (www.rapereliefselter.bc.ca) between 2001 and 2005. My understanding of this case is based on reading legal documents, on website discussions, and on interviews conducted in 2004 with Kimberly Nixon, her lawyer barbara findlay, and supporter and activist Becki Ross. For an excellent critique of the case by Nixon's lawyer, see findlay (2003).

What interests me here are the arguments made against Nixon both in the petition and outside of it, arguments that illustrate what I am calling the disparaging response. The success of the 2003 petition was due to the decision that transwomen like Nixon do “not meet Rape Relief’s community membership criterion” of women as “those who have lived their entire lives as females” (*Vancouver Rape Relief Society v. Nixon*, para. 103, 118), that Rape Relief does have the right to make this distinction, and that excluding Nixon was not a discriminatory act.³

One’s response to this decision will of course depend on one’s allegiances to Rape Relief and to what the Honourable Mr. Justice E.R.A. Edwards calls its “article of faith” (para. 54). This article of faith refers to Rape Relief’s contention that “the experience of living exclusively as a female” has “political and therapeutic significance” (para. 125) for its work and that those without such experience ought to be excluded. The question of who gets to be a woman, specifically whether living only part of one’s life as a woman makes one “woman-enough” (para. 118), has been and continues to be the main issue. Before discussing some of the disturbing ways this question has been taken up both before and after the various judgments, I will comment briefly on some of the other implications of the case as I understand it.

For supporters of Rape Relief, two things are at stake: preventing men from demanding access to women’s organizations, and confirming women’s rights to organize separately. Yet these related concerns are difficult to credit unless one reads transwomen as men. So what looks to this group as a victory of women’s rights to organize among themselves, looks to others, including myself, as the right of specific organizations to impose discriminatory standards as long as these can be “justified” in court as necessary to meeting its goals. As Nixon’s lawyer barbara findlay (2003: 72) claims, the goal of ensuring the safety of women victims of male violence does not logically require the exclusion of transwomen from the role of counselor. Clearly we need to ask whether or not it does. Less clear is why the BC Supreme Court Judge took this on faith, stating that “Rape Relief was not required to prove its primary purpose was the promotion of the interests of persons who were ‘woman enough’ to meet its ‘political definition’ of women as persons who had lived their entire lives as females” (para.118). Even more disconcerting is the judge’s decision that “a reasonable person excluded for having experienced part of her life as a male ... would recognize that ... the basis for her exclusion ... did not compromise the excluded person’s dignity” (para. 125). Thus, Nixon is deemed unreasonable. Presumably this is because a “reasonable person” in Nixon’s shoes would have

3 As is customary, the Court gave no reasons for its denial. My thanks to barbara findlay for updating me on this case. Personal communication, August 2009. Further references are to specific paragraphs from this 2003 document.

recognized and accepted Rape Relief's "article of faith" that "woman enough" refers to those assigned female from birth. In any case, her experience of a "loss of dignity" at being excluded is judged to be merely subjective, an experience "no reasonable [that is, rational or objective] person in her situation would experience" (para. 132). Moreover, the objective impact of exclusion on her dignity that is required to prove discrimination is said to be negligible because it is "quite evidently exclusion from a backwater, not from the mainstream of the economic, social and cultural life of the province" (para. 154).

No doubt there is much to dispute in this judgment from a legal point of view: claims about how other "reasonable" transsexuals might act; the right of service providing groups to exclude legally recognized women; and the role of legal discourse in defining women's rights.⁴ My focus here is on disputes among non-trans feminists around the definition of woman and the implications of those disputes for our relationship with transwomen in particular. Much of what follows is based on claims made when the case was still before the Tribunal, but the wider concerns and the arguments made for and against remain much the same today.

Transsexuals pose a challenge, intentionally or not, to mainstream feminist conceptions of sex as a stable and immutable basis of gender, a challenge which raises questions about the presumed "authenticity" of identity and about the inclusiveness of feminist politics.⁵ Defending Rape Relief's rejection of Nixon, Judy Rebick, former president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), claims: "The challenge is 'who is a woman?'" It is a question she believes "we're just beginning to deal with" (cited in Bailey 2000). But as Joanne Meyerowitz's (2002) study of the history of transsexuality in the United States shows, the question of whether "male-to-female" transsexuals are women has been tossed about in popular culture at least since Christine Jorgensen's story hit the press over 50 years ago. It has been in the feminist literature at least since Raymond's famous diatribe against transsexuals in 1979 and has been discussed with respect to the Michigan Women's Music Festival since the early 1990s. In 1996, Leslie Feinberg (1996: 109) noted that the "one pivotal question ... being discussed in women's communities all over the country" is "how is woman defined?" Perhaps those who experience this question as new ought to acquaint themselves with its history before making public and potentially damaging statements about transwomen.

The division of opinion over the Nixon case is symptomatic of a longstanding and deep divide among non-trans feminists whose theoretical commitments to

4 For an incisive analysis of the legal dimension that contests the outcome, see Chambers 2007. For an analysis that supports the outcome, see Harris 2006.

5 For a discussion of the concept of authenticity with respect to trans identities, see Hird (2002a: 581–2).

identity politics on the one hand and deconstructive politics on the other may not be reconcilable. Ann Snitow detailed this internal division in her 1990 essay, "A Gender Diary," and it seems she was right to contend it cannot be bridged. At the risk of widening this divide, I would describe the location of feminist politics in a presumed universal and stable identity of "women" as *the problematic basis* on which Nixon's claim to womanhood has been rejected by the women at Rape Relief and by their supporters. In terms of Rose's distinction mentioned earlier, this problematic feminist position politicizes identity by foreclosing it instead of taking the opportunity to question it.

Members of Rape Relief have no trouble deciding who "real" women are, or knowing what psychological capacities they possess. They assert that "we do not agree that every person that honestly claims to be a woman ... is one" and that because Nixon "didn't grow up female, she could not empathize with victims of violence seeking counseling" (cited in Nolen 2000). Lee Lakeman, a long-time collective member, is blunter: transwomen "aren't women. They don't know what it is like to be treated like a woman. They can't fully appreciate what kind of oppression and fear women live with" (cited in Grocock-Renshaw 2001: 76). These beliefs were embraced if not strengthened by two leading national newspaper columnists, Michele Landsberg (2000) and Margaret Wenté (2000), in their respective newspaper columns, "Rape crisis center in B.C. endures assault" and "Who gets to be a woman?" Landsberg, who claims that she would "pay lip-service" to transsexual women as women, nonetheless publicly declares her outrage that Nixon would presume to see herself as one. She writes: "Want to cross-dress and send up our culture's gender strictures by playing the vamp with a feather boa and sequins? Fine. But don't show up at the rape crisis centre and ask to counsel women who have been victimized by male sexual violence." The view that transsexual women are "really" men pervades Landsberg's rhetorical claim that the crisis center "endures assault" by Nixon whose "unwanted advances" make her one of the "enemies" of woman-centered services.

In my view, Wenté's potentially useful question, "who gets to be a woman?" could have inspired some valuable reflection on the issue. Instead, echoing Landsberg, Wenté implies that the crisis center is the "real victim of injustice" and that the prospect of being counseled by "someone who appears to be a man in drag" would victimize the women seeking help. The nastiness of these remarks is echoed by other anti-Nixon feminists whose articles appear on Rape Relief's website.⁶ Writing for the *Edmonton Sun*, Mindelle Jacobs (2000) states

6 I have no desire to question individuals' claims to be feminists, as some readers have suggested. We know we are not a homogeneous political body, and that we are capable of making mistakes as well as capable of making profound social and personal transformations.

that Nixon “can stomp up and down in her over-sized high heels insisting she’s a woman all she wants but some rape victims just might not buy it.” In a *National Post* article, Christine Boyle shares her view that Nixon should not counsel rape victims because they “may feel that someone who lived as a man is not a peer on the issue of male oppression; and ... might have a prurient interest in confidences respecting sexual/gendered assaults” (cited in Hume 2001). If the usefulness of Wente’s question is missed by her, by Landsberg, and by the supporters of Rape Relief, it is because for them the answer is clear: One is born a woman, period. Although the hostile response of Rape Relief is apparently not widely shared by other crisis centers in Canada, and one hopes elsewhere, it does reveal a number of questionable assumptions about trans and non-trans women, based partly on ignorance, partly on fear, and partly on an intractable feminist identity politic deemed an “article of faith” by the BC Supreme Court Judge.⁷

It should be clear by now that my primary interest in this case lies in its ability to expose those questionable assumptions and the politics they both reflect and produce. Like Nixon I had hoped, perhaps naively, that the final resolution to the legal dispute would support her position. And I was gratified that Lori Chambers (2007: 334) concludes her detailed analysis of the legal dimensions of the case with the view that Nixon’s exclusion was “unethical and unprincipled.” At issue for me in this case was, and still is, the eruption of transphobia it precipitated, an eruption that many trans activists may have anticipated, but one that took me by surprise. By the time I interviewed Nixon in 2004, it was apparent that her personal exclusion from Rape Relief, hurtful as it was, was not the only concern.

Nixon experienced the overturning of the Human Rights Tribunal decision as “an act of violence,” an attack not only on her identity but on all trans people’s identities. Yet she was quick to add that this loss was no isolated incident, and that it needs to be placed in the context of “years and years of oppression and discrimination.” Nixon elucidated her own struggle to transition, and the difficulty of “trying to maintain a career, or salvage a career, the loss of family and friends because of transphobia, trying to find employment, housing, and getting health services,” adding that “it’s all based on class and privilege and access to resources.” Painful as it was, she read her exclusion as a catalyst for

7 Geraldine Glattstein, the executive director of Vancouver’s WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre, says she would welcome a transgendered woman as a volunteer (Nolen 2000), and Jacobs (2000) notes that in Edmonton, six of the eighty-odd volunteers at the Sexual Assault Centre are men. Research by Caroline White (2002) demonstrates that 72.5 percent of sexual assault centers and transition houses in British Columbia were accessible to transsexual women by 2000.

exposing the transphobia that exists even within feminist organizations with an explicitly anti-oppressive agenda:

The difficult part is that for nine years and counting, Rape Relief has been able to continue to perpetuate their hatred for trans people throughout the whole complaint process. And it's actually very difficult to sit there and have them not acknowledge you as being who you are and not being believed. When you come from an abusive relationship, and you get to these organizations, these are the things they try to show you not to do, and yet they do it just because they don't get it.

One might expect this experience to culminate in bitterness not only toward members of Rape Relief, but also toward feminism. But Nixon found an ally in Barbara Findlay. The support of the trans community and of other feminists both in Canada and internationally motivated her to become “a catalyst for change” and to advocate on behalf of all trans people, including the most oppressed.

The good will Nixon extends to all feminists, including those at Rape Relief, is commendable, especially since it is not always reciprocated. Indeed, there is a major rift between those who acknowledge transwomen as women and those who do not. And to place transwomen on a continuum of women where some are pure women and others are some hybrid mix, is hardly a subtle or convincing justification for trans exclusion.⁸ On the disparaging side of the rift there are, however, some distinctions to be made. Here we might envisage a continuum with those who reject transsexual identity claims outright on one end. On the other end are those who construe transsexuals as unwitting dupes of patriarchal norms or medical technologies and who believe that what they should be doing is transcending gender or transforming themselves. The latter's arguments, offered for example by Golden (2000), and Hausman (2001), were not prominent in the negative responses to Nixon, although they play a considerable role in another schism between transsexual and transgender perspectives.⁹ The more prevalent arguments of those voicing outright rejection repeat all or some of the faulty assumptions espoused by Raymond (1979) at least two decades earlier: that women's experiences and socialization are homogeneous; that transwomen cannot know how non-trans women feel; that transwomen are really men intent on taking over women's bodies; that transwomen have no interest in challenging women's oppression. How do we make sense of these beliefs?

According to Becki Ross, who wrote an affidavit on transphobia at the request of Nixon's lawyer, and who shared her compelling views with me in

8 For this view, see Harris 2006.

9 These views are discussed in Chapter 2.

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a rather breathtaking interview, these beliefs persist for several interrelated reasons.¹⁰ First, there is a kind of “collective amnesia” concerning the fact that

one of the major sets of struggles in the women’s movement over the last three-and-a-half decades has been the struggle around difference. So here we are with all this knowledge, incredible pain and suffering and enlightenment and more pain and suffering around race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, region, language. And here we are with an opportunity to learn something more than we already know about gender, and we have Judy Rebick, Rape Relief, Janice Raymond, and other radical feminist forces in the background claiming that transwomen are men, are masquerading as men, are men intent on stealing women’s energy, and making women obsolete and self-mutilating in order to take over the women’s movement!

Second, there is a failure to learn from trans experiences about gender and gender oppression:

After three-and-a-half decades of trying to struggle through issues around inclusion and exclusion, we have people like Rape Relief, Sheila Jeffreys, Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, and Janice Raymond ... arguing that we have nothing to learn about gender, and about gender oppression by listening to what transwomen and, in this particular instance, what transsexual women have to say about their experiences of discrimination, humiliation, oppression, subordination, and subjection.

Third, there is an “ideologically driven refusal of knowledge altogether” which becomes “rooted in a particular doctrine that actually makes it impossible in some ways to relinquish, or to change, or to modify, or to interrupt it.” This desire not to know culminates in the perpetuation of the faulty and sometimes contradictory assumptions about similarities and differences between and among trans and non-trans women that I listed above. Criticized by Carol Riddell (2006) in her astute response to Raymond in 1980, these assumptions have been questioned again in numerous discussions of the Nixon case (Chambers 2007; Elliot 2004; Lowry 2002; Namaste 2005; Prasad 2005; Shelley 2008). If Ross is correct in attributing their persistence to a *refusal* of knowledge, not simply a lack of knowledge, then there is little to be gained by repeating their critique.

What does bear repeating is Ross’s conviction that we still have a good deal to learn about gender, and that listening to trans stories like Nixon’s reveals

10 The interview was conducted on March 25, 2004. Ross is a sociologist and trans ally with a history of scholarship and activism around women’s, queer, and sex worker struggles. I thank Lorna Weir for recommending I interview Ross.

relationships to gender that depart from the stereotypes. They are stories of resistance and struggle:

People like Kimberly who were born and socialized as male actually resisted that, never identified as male to begin with, resisted that in explicit and covert ways from the moment that they understood that they were being socialized and that they needed to preserve some sense of themselves as real and alive and whole individuals with integrity. They understood that they had to resist that and took lots of risks, and sometimes didn't survive because they killed themselves before they could actually realize congruity and wholeness. We need to hear about how socialization is not some kind of singular, seamless, uniform process.

What we need to hear may be different from what we want to know. Ross attributes the collective desire not to know to an “ongoing and stubborn, unrelenting anti-male doctrine.” Although she believes it is important to unearth the emotional and political investments in this perspective, and to “delegitimize, neutralize and contest it,” I am less convinced that this can be done. As Felman (1987) has persuasively argued, the desire not to know is a resistance to something that threatens one's sense of the world or oneself, a defense that is not easily dismantled.

In support of the idea that there is a motivated refusal to know about trans lives, we can note that by the time Nixon's case gained public attention there already existed a substantial transgender literature, some of which originated in feminist communities. For example, Pat Califia (1997) and Aaron Devor (1997) had both provided solid social and political overviews of many of the issues confronting trans people from an explicitly feminist perspective. In arguing for a coalition of gay and trans activists, Califia offered a thought-provoking analysis of the history of transphobia and trans activism. Especially important here was Califia's unequivocal assertion of the “intrinsic value” of trans people and their contributions to “our understanding of what it means to be human” (81). Devor's sociological study of transmen offered a very different yet equally valuable study of trans lives. His inclusion of extensive interview material gave voice to both personal and political issues of importance to participants, paving the way for a more complex understanding of trans lives.¹¹

Potentially more promising than efforts to undo the investments of radical feminists is the dedication of young and third wave feminists to difference. In Ross's experience and mine, young women appear to be much more willing to listen to stories about transgender lives than previous generations were, and most are shocked by the anti-trans feminism they encounter. In my view, this is not only because they have personal acquaintances with queer or trans persons,

11 Devor's work is discussed in Chapter 4.

or because they are involved in anti-oppression social movements, but also because they have encountered the problematization of concepts of identity that has been central to feminist thinking for the last 20 years.

Through the work of Butler and others, poststructuralist inquiry offers critical tools for rethinking questions of sex, gender, sexuality, and embodiment, tools that provide alternative perspectives on trans lives as well.¹² Butler's early and ongoing efforts (1990, 1993, 2004) to subvert dominant forms of identity involves neither discrediting women as subjects, nor denying our subordination, nor refusing the concept of agency, as some feminists fear.¹³ Poststructuralist feminists do not deny the value of much feminist theory and practice based on identity categories. But in questioning the way that sex, gender, bodies, and sexualities have been conceptualized, they challenge and critique mainstream constructions of those concepts as given (either by nature or by culture) and unalterable. From this perspective, "a critical genealogy of the naturalization of sex and of bodies" (Butler 1990: 147) remains a central political task if we are to critique the regulatory norms and practices that restrict our activities and constrain our identities. It is a political task many non-trans feminists share with queer and trans people.¹⁴ I believe it can be pursued without idealizing the least normative identities, since the other side of idealization is erasure, as Viviane Namaste (2000: Chapter 1) has pointed out in her critique of Butler. It can also be pursued without disparaging more normative identities like straight or queer femininity.

In claiming that the category of women is "essentially incomplete," a "site of contested meanings," Butler (1990: 15) reiterates arguments previously developed in the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva (1981a) and Jacqueline Rose (1986: Chapter 3). These authors usefully challenge the premises of identity politics that limit, constrain, or prevent alternative configurations of sex and gender (Butler 1990: 147) or that attempt to demarcate the boundaries of "real" women. As Judith Halberstam (1998a) and Bobby Noble (2006a) argue, pursuing authenticity by policing categories and boundaries (state sanctioned or not) relegates alternative or queer embodiments to the margins. Identity politics also reify and dictate constructions that serve patriarchal and heterosexist interests even if some radical feminists believe their interests are also best served by these constructions. The poststructuralist view does not preclude feminist

12 For contributions in the ethnomethodological tradition, see Fenstermaker and West (2002), Kessler and McKenna (1978, 2000), and Garfinkel (1967).

13 For an alternative, critical, and in my view mistaken reading of poststructuralism, see Smith (1999: 96–130).

14 That some trans persons also sometimes support this belief in an innate core gender identity is understandable, if problematic. The problems are discussed in Chapter 5.

arguments for having “women-only” spaces, but it does not support excluding transwomen whose existence challenges the taken-for-granted boundaries of that category.

Given that many trans people identify with feminism or seek allies in the feminist community, we non-trans feminists need to inform ourselves about their needs and goals, and to engage both theoretically and practically with ideas and institutions that oppress them.¹⁵ This need not detract from other important work performed by women’s organizations. As Geraldine Glattstein, director of Vancouver’s WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre, states: “All our work is anti-oppression work, so why wouldn’t we find the oppression of women who feel they are trapped in the wrong body equally important?” (cited in Nolen 2000). As previously noted, the majority of women’s sexual assault centers and transition houses in British Columbia share Glattstein’s belief that excluding transwomen from feminist organizations and denying them support runs counter to the spirit of feminism today. In my view, feminists must continue to challenge norms and expectations around embodiment, around what constitutes mental and physical well being, around questions of gender and sexual identity, around access to legal, medical, and social services. Our views will be diverse. They will be contested, and ought to be contested if we are to deepen our understanding of each other and if we are to be allies in the process of improving the material conditions of all women’s lives. But to reject these efforts prematurely, on the basis that we already know who deserves our support or who our “enemies” are, is surely a mistake.

Unfortunately, as the Nixon case demonstrates, the least reflective and least informed voices quickly came to define “the feminist response” to trans people as decidedly hostile. More work is needed to create the conditions in which dialogue within feminist communities and between trans and non-trans feminist communities will enrich our mutual understanding and strengthen our potential for solidarity. In a thought-provoking article on the question of how to foster solidarity between feminist and transgender communities, Cressida Heyes (2003) suggests ways to bridge the gap between the opposing views of some non-trans feminists and some trans spokespersons. Heyes (2003: 1095) is critical of the view taken by Janice Raymond and Bernice Hausman (1995, 2001) that characterizes “the transsexual as the dupe of gender.” This view implies that because transsexuals utilize medico-technological practices, there is no hope for any meaningful political critique of gender norms, hence no potential for alliance with non-trans feminists. Heyes respectfully disagrees with this position, showing how the disparaging response that has been given

15 For overviews of institutional oppression in Canada, see Namaste (2000); in the UK, see More and Whittle (1999); in the US, see Califia (1997) and Spade (2003, 2006).

so much attention and in which many of the critiques of Nixon are based is rooted in claims that are both “tautological” and “false” (2003: 1116). She convincingly argues that transpersons are not apolitical dupes of gender or of medicalization, and that many do identify with feminism. Indeed, she shows how transwomen face forms of oppression similar to other women, and how they offer a challenge to the logic of sex and gender binaries. At the same time, she questions the claim of Leslie Feinberg (1996) and Kate Bornstein (1994) that individuals have a right to adopt any form of gender expression they choose. This uncritical claim embraces a problematic, individualist vision of social life and overlooks the fact that oppressive gender norms inhere particularly in hegemonic expressions of masculinity that need to be questioned and transformed, not embraced (2003: 1112).

As my analysis of the negative responses to the Nixon case demonstrates, some non-trans feminists continue to adopt a polemical and disparaging position, pursuing entrenched prejudicial views “to the detriment of others and of difference” (Sullivan 2009: 138). This prevents me from concluding with Heyes that all feminists share her goals of contesting “rigid disciplining of dimorphic sex and gender categories, an enforced normative ideal body type, objectification, or abjection” (2003: 1116). Insofar as the disparagers persist in naturalizing gender, enforcing boundaries, denying legitimacy to trans embodiments, and stifling challenges to existing norms, it is difficult to read these goals as shared. On the other hand, there is much evidence to suggest that this polemical “waging of war ... against alterity” can be countered by those willing to embrace “problematization as an *ethos*,” as Sullivan recommends: “unlike polemics, problematization as an ethics of intercorporeality, of heterogeneity, of generosity, does not foreclose, in advance, an openness to the other and the experiences, challenges, and indeterminable subjugated knowledges that the other brings to any and every encounter” (2009: 138, 139). This openness to the other was amply illustrated in Ross’s view of the “fabulous multiplicities” that exist: “our knowledge of all those multiplicities can only be enriched, deepened, and expanded by learning from those very people who inhabit those diverse places and spaces, identities, subjectivities. And to foreclose prematurely the opportunities to learn, to meet those differences, is an absolute travesty.”

Polemical positions are, however, difficult to resist, and I am not altogether certain I have managed to avoid them in the formulation of my own views. Nonetheless, Namaste’s (2005) surprising view that the question of identity raised by debates over the Nixon case is no longer valuable requires some response. Her intentionally provocative claim is that a focus on the question of identity is severely limited and precludes examining the larger historical and institutional frameworks that are also operative in the Nixon case. Aiming to conduct an analysis that “moves beyond questions of identity, matters of who is or is not a woman, debates about whom we can include,” Namaste argues

that it is only when we get *beyond* these questions that we can address the more pressing issues of “civil status, access to health care, the decriminalization of prostitution, abusive police practices,” and the exclusion of transpersons from women’s shelters (2005: x, 3). In my view, Namaste and co-author Georgia Sitara (in Namaste 2005) usefully illustrate how the Nixon case can be used to critique the racist history of claims to a “universal experience” of women, to show how issues of class are central to organizations that purport to counsel women victims of violence, and to query the use of the state to “protect” women’s rights insofar as protective legislation can be used for imperialist purposes. However, with reference to my previous discussions of the Nixon case, Namaste implies that my problematization of Wente’s question, “who gets to be a woman?”¹⁶ precludes a critical examination of “feminist history, theory and politics” (77), and that it is the wrong question to ask. To clarify, it was never my intention to claim this was the *only* question to ask, but rather to suggest that it might open up the question of who gets to decide what the terms of inclusion or exclusion in feminist organizations might be while simultaneously exposing the political strategies enlisted in refusing to recognize transsexual women as women. These remain important questions for me, for other feminists, and for some transsexuals.

Several objections can be made against the choice between identity and politics as laid out in Namaste’s polemic, a choice that threatens to preclude asking some of the conceptual and political questions non-trans feminists have been grappling with and that I have been arguing we still need to address. First, as I hope my analysis of the Nixon case has shown, to suggest we move beyond questions we have not thought through to date in any adequate way seems counter-productive to the aim of taking transsexual lives seriously. Second, if the inclusion or exclusion of transsexuals in feminist communities is not an issue, then how can we expect non-trans feminists to support the needs of transsexuals in those areas Namaste cites as the most important: health care, law, employment, policing, and shelters? If non-trans feminists exclude or vilify transsexuals, how are we to harness support for these crucial matters and how are we to work progressively in those sites where feminists are potentially employed? How are the institutional changes, such as the decriminalization of trans lives that Namaste calls for, to take place if there is no better understanding of trans lives than the prejudicial views that constitute the disparaging response to Nixon? Third, I find Namaste’s demand that we choose between questions of identity and the real life needs of transsexuals sets up a misleading and unnecessary opposition. What if we read those questions of identity as themselves inherently political? Far from diverting us from the material reality

16 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at a Women’s Studies symposium, and published (Elliot 2002, 2004).

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of trans lives, what if questions of identity are understood to accompany all political work in (or against) institutions and organizations?

Certainly there are other pressing issues to consider, including the struggle to access social services by those transsexuals who are the least well off, as Namaste claims. The critical examination of non-trans feminist views about transsexuals as elicited by the Nixon case provides one contested site for addressing our internal differences. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, questions of identity animate much of the debate between transsexual and transgendered groups, a debate which has created a divisive hierarchy between them. In those exchanges, some are calling for the recognition of divergent identities in order to move not beyond identity, but beyond the hierarchy constructed by its insufficient valuation. If, as Namaste argues, “uncritical engagement with identity actually pre-empts any kind of institutional analysis” (19), then perhaps a critical engagement with identity will enable us to grapple with the oppressive policies and practices that operate in, through, and beyond the particular case of Kimberly Nixon.



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Chapter 2

Revaluing Gender Diversity Beyond the Ts/Tg Hierarchy

In the 1970s and 1980s, some feminist theorists of transsexuality sought the value of transsexuals in their potential to transgress aspects of the dominant gender order. Transsexuals were supposedly individuals who, fed up with an overly rigid and prescriptive gender order, were opting out of their assigned gender altogether. However, according to Janice Raymond (1979) and others, transsexuals fail to live up to this transgressive potential because they refuse to politicize their motives, they buy into a sexist medical model, or they are simply “dupes” of a patriarchal gender order. Responding to Raymond on the one hand and to the hegemonic assumptions of gender reflected in medical discourses of transsexuality on the other, Sandy Stone (1991) and Kate Bornstein (1994) promote the queering of transsexuality that has come to be associated with transgender theory. Conventional transsexual narratives based on the concept of inhabiting the “wrong body” and the desire to pass as a woman or a man are criticized by Stone (1991: 295) for sacrificing “the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience” in order to conform to existing gender expectations. Instead, she calls for the reclaiming of transsexual histories and the “myriad of alterities” (299) that trans embodiment represents. Importantly, Stone urges a reading of transsexuals “as a *genre*—a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (296).¹ In a similar vein, Bornstein promotes the “gender outlaw” as someone who rejects any identification with conventional categories of gender. Calling for the deconstruction of gender, Bornstein (1994: 132) excludes from her political agenda those transsexuals whose projects of re-embodiment subscribe to “the culture’s definitions of gender.” Transgendered thus comes to stand for the position of outlaw, which Bornstein describes as those who are “transgressively gendered” (135).²

1 Trish Salah (2009) has recently developed this project.

2 “Transgressively” gendered or not, for the sake of clarity I shall continue to include transsexuals under the umbrella terms “trans” or “transgender,” and to use the term transsexual when referring to the specific subgroup consisting of those transsexuals who prefer to disassociate themselves from the term transgender. These distinctions are discussed in my Introduction, note 1.

Since the publication of these widely read texts, some feminist, queer, and transgender theorists have come to champion certain expressions of transsexuality for their transgressive value once again. Transsexual lives and theories are celebrated insofar as they are seen to represent implicit, or better, explicit critiques of a heterosexist gender order that prescribes and legitimates some types of gender expression while punishing and delegitimizing others. Politically attractive for many critical gender theorists is trans theory's promotion of alternative gender expressions that call into question both the rigidity of socially mandated, gender-appropriate behavior and the belief that such expressions are natural and immutable. Although Butler and Halberstam have become major targets of the transsexual critique of this trans theory, at least in academic publications, it is important to remember that it originated with and continues to be developed by prominent transsexual activists and theorists. For example, despite contesting the conceptual and political efficacy of the term transgender, Riki Wilchins (2002) nevertheless champions the destruction of normative genders and of transsexual desires to be normatively gendered. She promotes the concept of "genderqueer" (28) as a potentially more inclusive and valuable political position. Actively challenging taken-for-granted meanings about bodies and about gender as a fixed set of oppositional differences are tasks that genderqueers share with other queer-identified groups as well.³

As a result of this more celebratory trend, or at least in response to it, there is a growing concern in some transsexual communities that a queer-identified transgender movement has come to define the terms by which to measure the value of transgendered and transsexual persons alike. Insofar as they fashion their own concerns and position as more transgressive than those of transsexuals, transgender activists and theorists engage in downplaying or even denying that which many transsexuals consider to be defining features of their experience: the right to identify as women and men. Conversely, transsexual activists and theorists are accused of dismissing transgendered persons who refuse to settle on a stable identity as "flighty" (Irving 2007: 71) or as "dilettantes and recreationalists in the game of gender" (Halberstam 1998a: 167). This rift is not new. It was the source of tension in trans communities well before Stone and Bornstein made its terms explicit. Since then, it has been addressed by trans and non-trans theorists (Elliot and Roen 1998, Halberstam 1998a, Heyes 2000, 2001, 2003, Hird 2002a, MacDonald 1998, Prosser 1998, Namaste 1996, 2000, 2005, Rubin 1996, 1998a, 1999, Scheman 1999, Wilchins 2002). But in the new

3 Trans theorist and activist Michelle O'Brien (2003: 8–9) has criticized the genderqueer community for emphasizing a narrow version of genderqueer persons as "female-assigned, white, young, queer, urban, hip, non-transsexual, middle-class, politically radical and feminist." I thank Trish Salah for drawing my attention to O'Brien's work.

millennium we see a continuation of this tension, as well as increased support for the transgender queer position among trans and non-trans feminists (Hines 2007, Noble 2006a).

I agree with Viviane Namaste (2005: 21–2) that true diversity cannot be achieved by adopting the terms of reference of transgender or genderqueer politics and ignoring those of a substantial group of transsexuals. My analysis begins with her important intervention that reveals the harmful effects of promoting the goals of the former at the expense of the latter. I then examine two examples from the transgender queer perspective that appear to substantiate Namaste’s critique, before discussing strategies for challenging the rift. Without promoting what Namaste calls transsexual political agendas to the neglect of transgender agendas, I suggest non-trans feminists adopt a broader stance that recognizes the needs and goals of both, and that understands where and why they conflict. This position contests Bernice Hausman’s (2001: 486) refusal to support either side on the grounds that neither lives up to the feminist goal of “giving up on gender.” Examining this rift can be instructive for non-trans feminists committed to supporting transpersons both on personal and professional levels, as well as for those of us who grapple with the complexities of these debates in the classroom. Resolving the tensions that surround this debate is not our prerogative, although we may choose to support the significant steps taken in that direction by those ts/tg theorists discussed in the final section of this chapter.

The Transsexual Critique

In *Sex Change, Social Change*, Namaste (2005) clarifies what is at stake in this debate, taking a controversial stand against queer readings of transsexuality and against the focus on identity that has been important to queer, feminist, and transgender theorists. Namaste brings a multitude of complaints to bear on the ways in which trans politics and trans studies are conducted. From her perspective, transgender persons represent the dominant and more privileged group whose theoretical and political perspectives are based on a gay/lesbian, queer framework that is anathema to most transsexuals (2005: 2). According to Namaste (2005: 4), “the majority of transsexuals do not make sense of their lives in lesbian/gay terms,” and they have little interest in questions of identity or in the cultural analysis of gender. Thus, queer and/or trans feminist theorists like Butler and Halberstam, and Bornstein and Stone, are accused of misappropriating transsexual identities and using them as tools to serve their own projects of criticizing the sex/gender binary. Four interrelated problems are associated with this misappropriation, problems that constitute the basis of this rift as described by Namaste and others. As we will see, these problems are

complicated by fundamental disagreements over the meaning of queer as an identity, as a relation to heteronormativity, and as a political project.

A major bone of contention for Namaste is that the transgender emphasis on gender identity obscures transsexuals' concern with the social and political processes involved in becoming and living as the other sex. Namaste (2005: 7) argues that when transsexuals are lumped (or lump themselves) into the umbrella category of transgender, their refusal of an original or (mis)assigned gender is mistakenly assumed to represent a *critique* of the binary sex/gender system instead of a "different embodied position within that system." Refusing one's assigned gender is also mistakenly assumed to represent a challenge to the discreet social categories of woman and man, if not to the concept of sexual difference itself. But as trans studies scholar Trish Salah (2006) claims in her analysis of Butler's (2004) theory, far from refusing the category of sexual difference, transsexual experience demonstrates the need for a better account of it: "The challenge to gender which this book would undo is that of an account of sexual difference that straddles and confounds the social, the biological, and the symbolic registers." According to Salah, transsexuals locate themselves within the categories of a binary system in order to establish congruence between sex and gender and to claim their right to live as men and women. Namaste and Salah both argue that in annexing transsexuals to the category of transgender, which is praised for its opposition to sex/gender congruence, Butler and others render invisible aspects of an experience many transsexuals claim is specific to them.

Jay Prosser (1998) and Henry Rubin (1996, 1998a, 1999) have made similar claims about the queer critique of transsexuality. Rubin has repeatedly criticized queer praise for transgender boundary crossing, a criticism that carries an implicit condemnation of transsexuals' desires to live in their chosen sex. His concern is not to disparage the queering of trans *per se*, which he claims has "provided many trans folks with more options and fewer regulations about the 'right' way to pursue their life projects" (1998a: 275). Rather, his concern is with the "appropriation of transsexuals by nontranssexual queers" (1998a: 275–6) who read transsexuals as valued examples of gender performativity only when they abandon their desire for congruence. It seems that for some trans and non-trans queer theorists, it is not queer enough to demonstrate the fact that one's gender identity is not biologically determined by one's birth sex, as transsexuals surely claim. For Butler and Wilchins, any account of sexual difference that exceeds the sociological, performative account is read as conservative, heteronormative, and essentialist. To be queer, hence politically progressive, transsexuals are expected to abandon the desire to alter their bodies to better

signify their gender, and so to abandon a fundamental understanding of their own experience of the body.⁴

This conceptualization of queer leads Prosser (1998: 59) to claim that some aspects of transsexual experience are “irreconcilable to queer,” aspects that include: “the importance of flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender identity; the desire to pass as ‘real-ly gendered’ in the world without trouble; perhaps above all ... a particular experience of the body that can’t simply transcend ... the literal.” Prosser concurs with Rubin that transsexuals are not dupes of gender; such a characterization misconstrues key aspects of their lives, including the centrality of sexed embodiment, and thus contributes to the erasure of their specificity. Rubin (1998a: 272) further attributes the failure to grasp transsexual experience, especially transsexual “desires to exist [in] a body consistent with internal body image,” to non-trans feminists Bernice Hausman (1995), Suzanne Kessler, and Wendy McKenna (1978). The latter consider transsexuals, unlike their transgender counterparts, to be insufficiently radical, which leads us to the second problem.

Another criticism Namaste and others make of transgender discourse is that it attributes a moral high ground to the queer goal of visibly contesting stable gender categories and construes transsexuals who wish to live as ordinary women and men as gender conservatives. If contesting stable sexed positions is the ideal transgressive position, then these transsexuals will be read as sadly lacking. The discourse of transgender warriors and outlaws that was developed by Leslie Feinberg (1996) and Bornstein (1994) and promoted by queer theorists clearly creates a hierarchy where “transgressive” transgender identities are valued more highly than the more conventional transsexual identities. Although Namaste agrees that most transsexuals are not interested in defining themselves as “gender radicals,” she chafes at the insinuation that transsexuals who refuse a visibly ambiguous gender expression are politically conservative. This insinuation not only establishes a hierarchy where transgendered persons consider themselves politically transgressive and relegate transsexuals to a politically conservative position, but it also narrows the realm of the political to a mode of gender expression that Namaste (2005: 22) finds unrealistic:

To state that one is neither a man nor a woman, or that one is a third gender, or that gender is only a social construct so one is, in fact, nothing, ignores the very fundamental reality of being in the world. Yes, we can state that we are not

4 It is true that some transsexual theorists have a more reductive, biologically essentialist understanding of this experience than others. Grappling with a more complex concept of sexual difference that cannot be reduced to either the biological or the social strikes me as crucial to understanding any experience of embodiment, including that of transsexuals.

men and not women when all is well in the world. But would someone please tell me how to get an apartment when one is neither a man nor a woman? Where does one find a physician to treat neither men nor women? And an employer? My point is that this transgendered discourse is utopic, and one profoundly informed by privilege: it assumes that one already has a job, housing, and access to health care.

Namaste finds that transgender discourse occludes the history of transsexual struggles for the right to live and work as transsexuals and minimizes the contribution of transsexual women and men to gender politics more broadly understood. It also implies that there is nothing politically valuable or transgressive to demanding that transsexual women and men be given access to the means to live ordinary lives. Moreover, the transgender idealization of gender incongruence assumes one has the luxury to take on the gender order. In her view, this is a stance that is simply not available to poor and working-class transsexuals whose ability to make a living, or to access housing or health care, would be jeopardized by adopting a visibly transgendered body.

Both justifying and complicating Namaste's critique are differing interpretations of the term "queer." Halberstam's use of "queer," for example, could be read as a critical position one adopts *vis-à-vis* hegemonic constructions of gender as fixed, oppositional, and immutable. Many heterosexual persons certainly refer to themselves as queer with this meaning in mind. Yet Namaste appears to read Halberstam's inclusion of queer in her description of trans as a *demand* to visibly cross gender boundaries, or to refuse to locate oneself within the categories man or woman. Many transsexuals could be said to be queer in the first sense of the term, in that they challenge assumptions about the supposedly fixed and immutable relationship of sex and gender identity, but not in the second sense that refuses categories altogether. For Namaste, Prosser, and Rubin, transsexuals' lives are already burdened by having to create a congruence that enables them simply to live as women and men. They do not need to assume "a revolutionary burden to refuse gender" as well (Rubin 1998a: 266). Many do not want to do so, which brings us to the third and related question of desire.

Erasing transsexual "desires for the ordinary"⁵ constitutes a third problem with the transgender/queer reading of transsexuality. According to Namaste, Prosser, and Rubin, transsexuals do not seek to queer or destabilize categories of gender but to successfully embody them, regardless of sexual orientation. Their more conventional desires, unlike those of most women and men, are hard won and deserving of respect. Moreover, although they refuse the gender-fucking strategies and illegible bodies that some feminist, queer, and transgender

5 Denise Bates (2002) has developed the concept of desiring the ordinary.

theorists promote, transsexuals are hardly supporters of a heteronormative gender order that “repudiates” (Shelley: 2008) their own existence. Although the queer transgendered perspective may place greater emphasis on the visible crossing of gender boundaries that interrupts taken-for-granted views of congruence between sex and gender, there is also something queer about the transsexual claim that their identity is not (obviously) grounded in their birth sex, and that for them, the desired congruence must be created.⁶

If this kind of “queering” of the heteronormative gender order is not dependent on a particular sexual orientation—and I do not see why it must be—then it does not warrant the negative response Namaste gives to it. With specific reference to Halberstam’s claim that in order to challenge gender hierarchies, the alternative masculinities of either butches or Ftms will need to be “feminist, antiracist, anti-elitist, and queer” (Halberstam 1998b: 307), Namaste interprets the queer imperative as requiring a specific sexual identity instead of just a critical relation to hegemonic gender ideals. Indeed, Namaste (2005: 20) states that Halberstam’s inquiry “has no respect for the lives of transsexual men who are heterosexual.” That is, Namaste reads Halberstam’s position as a *demand* that transsexuals refuse not only their identifications with men and women, but with heterosexuality as well.

The more restrictive meaning of queer that provokes what I take to be a misreading by Namaste is inconsistent with the spirit of Halberstam’s work. Even if the narrower definition of queer is more compatible with her own performance of masculinity, there is little to suggest that Halberstam is advocating its imposition on others. Namaste’s (2005: xii) description of what a progressive feminist social theory should be includes anti-elitist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist goals and is very similar to Halberstam’s list, minus the term queer. What is missing from Namaste’s list of political commitments in an otherwise allegedly feminist agenda is a concept that targets sexism and heterosexism. For many feminists today, of all sexual persuasions, the concept queer could easily be employed to impugn both sexism and heterosexism without any intention of belittling heterosexuals as Namaste fears. Moreover, it seems that even heterosexual transsexuals challenge heterosexist assumptions, and in this sense they contribute to a queer gender politic. For example, in his research with Ftms, Rubin (1998a: 277) notes a resistance to “hegemonic assumptions about the relationship between bodies and identities” as fixed and immutable. Indeed, he argues that “if we are to develop a radical transgender agenda, it must be generated from this knowledge and resistance” (277). Rubin’s (2003) book also provides many examples of Ftm resistance to both sexist and

6 The explicit goal of many transsexuals is to create an alignment of bodies and identities. Whether their bodies are read by others as coherent or incoherent, singular or hybrid, is another matter.

heterosexist beliefs. Respecting Namaste's concern that sexual identity not be prescribed for anyone, and acknowledging that other queer and transgendered theorists may be less careful to avoid such prescription, I nevertheless find her criticism of Halberstam unconvincing on this matter.⁷

A fourth point of contention is that transgender theory continues to advocate its own position as politically superior, more radical, and more progressive without seriously contending with transsexual theorists' responses to it and without taking transsexual needs and goals into account. Namaste's (1996, 2000) opposition to queer readings of transgender began a decade ago with her reading of Butler and Garber, and has since expanded to include many others as well. In *Sex Change, Social Change* (2005), she reiterates and broadens her earlier criticism of queer theory as producing "erasure and contempt for transsexual people" (2000: 24). As outlined in the previous three problems, this assessment is based on the claim that transgender/queer theorists and activists ignore transsexual efforts to achieve sex/gender congruence, misread transsexual goals as conservative, and disparage transsexual desires to live as women and men. But there is also a more pointed critique attributed to an expression of privileged indifference based on class. Namaste not only claims that the transgender/queer framework neglects transsexual lives and fails to address the institutional conditions of those lives due to a lack of comprehension. She also claims that its focus on identity and rights is "actually preventing us from developing any serious understanding or criticism of the institutional dimensions of our lives" (2005: 17), and that the transgender/queer discourse is one "that demands we ignore" (23) those dimensions. My concern with this decidedly polemical claim is that it may contribute to the very lack of engagement she laments.

Namaste's work goes a long way to deepen our understanding of transsexual lives in Canada, and her work is quickly published and widely read. As a scholar and an activist, Namaste's concern is to elucidate the material conditions of transsexual lives and to document the institutional practices that oppress transsexuals, particularly those who comprise the least privileged groups. Her analysis of the lives of transsexual prostitutes, drug users, prisoners, and homeless persons demonstrates how proposals to improve the lives of middle-class, employed transsexuals has little to no effect on improving the well-being of poor transsexuals whose voices are seldom heard.

I agree that Namaste's class and race analyses constitute vital work in this field. It offers a serious challenge to political organizing, one that urges the

7 Namaste argues that it is unreasonable to characterize as "queer" or "transgendered" transsexuals who, like the francophone members of her community, do not possess an equivalent term. For her argument on linguistic imperialism, see Namaste (2005: 103–26). Interestingly, David Valentine's (2007) research participants described themselves as "queer" instead of as transsexual or transgender.

development of alternative frameworks capable of addressing the diversity of trans lives. What is disconcerting about Namaste's rhetoric, and what may account in part for its failure to be engaged by others, are the oppositions she establishes between transsexuals and transgender queers such that the latter appear as a privileged minority that is unable to think beyond its own boundaries. Genderqueer transsexual activist Michelle O'Brien (2003) also speaks to the challenge posed by the fact that trans experience is mediated by race and class, but in ways that refuse some of the oppositions Namaste constructs. While agreeing with Namaste that white, middle-class persons dominate debates around trans politics, she maintains that people of color and poor people also identify as genderqueer. Moreover, like Namaste, O'Brien (2003: 10, 11) denounces the genderqueer critique of transsexuals as "unethical and politically divisive" (2003: 10), but not without lamenting the counterattacks on genderqueer people as equally divisive. O'Brien's more nuanced analysis of the race and class dynamics supports many of Namaste's observations without locating genderqueer interests as exclusively middle class.⁸ But I am anticipating here what might constitute answers to the important questions raised by the transsexual critique: In what ways does this critique accurately reflect the queer/transgender agenda? Is there or has there been a concerted effort to denigrate transsexuals? Does the "queering" of transsexuality open up a space for more possibilities, as Rubin suggests, and if so, does it also create unnecessary hierarchies that disparage transsexuals?

The Transgender/Queer Perspective

Representatives of the transgender/queer position include, among others, radical transsexuals Sandy Stone, Kate Bornstein, and Riki Wilchins, as well as transgender theorist Judith Halberstam and non-trans queer theorist Judith Butler. It is a position that *celebrates* what it takes to be the more transgressive effects of openly embracing transgender identity: embodying an ambiguous, or at least unstable, gender identity, refusing to "pass," and confounding any ability to be read as gay or straight. Whether these expressions of gender ought to be perceived as intelligible or unintelligible is a contested issue that is the topic of the rift I discuss in the next chapter. Here I respond to the questions raised in Namaste's critique by focusing on work by its most frequent targets. I begin with Butler's discussion of the diagnosis of gender identity disorder before turning to Halberstam's intervention in the "border wars" between butch and Ftm identities.

⁸ Trans activist Dan Irving (2007) offers a similarly astute class-based analysis, without the antagonistic polemics that Namaste engages in.

Butler on "Undiagnosing Gender"

It is true that the non-trans, queer-inspired, feminist interest in transsexuality grew out of a preoccupation with contesting normative expressions of gender and a desire to explore the theoretical and conceptual implications of transsexuality for queer theory. Some of the earlier formulations by Butler (1990, 1993) and Garber (1992) did invoke transsexuals to illustrate a particular position in their own theories. Hence, Butler and Garber have been criticized by Namaste (1996, 2000) and Prosser (1998) for using transsexuals as tokens in theoretical projects that have little to do with furthering an understanding of the conditions of transsexual lives. Grounded in the latter's experience as transsexuals, the knowledge they produce serves as a useful corrective to those earlier formulations and deserves to be taken into account.

Particularly irritating to Namaste is that the critical response to queer/tg texts by Prosser, Rubin (1999), and herself has not been addressed, at least not by Butler who writes about transsexuality without citing their work. Leaving aside the fact that Butler is not alone in this, and that numerous transgender authors could be accused of a similar neglect, it is true that Butler makes insufficient effort to address transsexual criticisms in her recent work. In the chapter "Undiagnosing Gender," where Butler (2004) explores the much-debated question of the usefulness of gender identity disorder (GID) as a diagnostic tool, the voices of transsexuals who argue for the diagnosis are neglected. Without endorsing the accusation of contempt, my reading of this text supports Namaste's (2005) and Salah's (2006) claims that Butler's engagement with transsexual concerns is inadequate. This inadequacy is even more problematic because writing on a question of the rights of others that is central to a major internal debate among those others requires careful attention to the arguments of both sides.⁹

Wading into what we might describe as a political minefield, Butler must be credited with attempting to examine both the benefits and the harms of the GID diagnosis that currently enable (some) transsexuals to gain access to the hormonal and surgical means to transition. In describing transitioning as a "practice of freedom" and "an exercise of autonomy," she acknowledges that it is contingent on the social and medical conditions in which it takes place. And

9 I suggest that addressing the rights of "others" requires paying closer attention to competing claims than when addressing one's own rights against an insider group who has an equal stake in the outcome. Paying closer attention does not entail deference to the allegedly superior expertise of the other, as Jacob Hale (1997) recommends, an injunction that is surely less salient in the face of internal debates. It does entail familiarizing oneself with claims on both sides, and thinking through the impact of one's own position on both. Risking nothing, many do not venture onto unfamiliar ground at all.

in analyzing the diagnosis as both “enabling” and “restrictive,” often “both at the same time” (77), Butler ultimately concludes that there is no way to secure “gendered agency” without radically altering the social world in which our choices inevitably are made (101). This conclusion follows upon her analysis of the diagnosis itself as paternalistic and pathologizing, such that “choosing” to submit to it, however strategically, entails a loss of agency and a subjection to the regulatory norms of a rigid gender order. This subjection is particularly deplored when the diagnosis is used to control and stigmatize gay youth (78).¹⁰ Butler is aware that despite the current social practices (which are criticized to different ends by persons on both sides of the debate), GID does facilitate access to treatment for some transsexuals, and in this way it can be said to further “transautonomy” (76). And even though her critique of the diagnosis itself is problematic (as I shall argue), she nevertheless states that “it would be wrong to call for its eradication without first putting into place a set of structures through which transitioning can be paid for and legal status attained” (82). Butler is clearly arguing that nothing about the diagnosis and its regulation should be altered unless and until different social structures can be established. Furthermore, different structures cannot or will not be put into place until a complete overhaul of the existing gender order occurs, one that would enable transition without the current forms of medical regulation.

Speculation on what an ideal society might facilitate, permit, or promote with respect to changing sex is all very well, but trans activists are more concerned with the institutional mechanisms that exist. From this perspective, Butler does appear to place an excessive rhetorical weight on those who would eradicate the sole existing mechanism for securing legitimate access to hormones and/or surgery. Given the volatile internal debates on this issue, the voices of those who lobbied for and those who continue to defend the diagnosis must be heard as well as those who speak against it. By comparing Butler’s discussion to the brief yet compelling arguments by Margaret Deirdre O’Hartigan (1997) and Riki Wilchins (1997b) for and against the GID diagnosis, it soon becomes apparent how Butler’s discussion is rhetorically skewed in favor of those who speak against it.

Butler’s description of GID does not fully appreciate the historical efforts of transsexuals to establish a recognized medical condition that enabled doctors to perform SRS in the first place. As Salah (2006) points out, this history has been documented by Aaron Devor (1997), Judith Meyerowitz (2002), Prosser (1998), and Rubin (2003) “who have demonstrated the agency of transsexuals in developing the technology of hormone replacement therapy, in lobbying

10 Katrina Roen (2009) suggests that GID clinics often serve, on the contrary, to prevent transsexuality and to promote homosexuality instead. According to a recent interview with Ken Zucker, this is the case in Toronto as well (Dennis 2009).

for access to sex reassignment surgery in the US, and in founding and funding gender clinics, as well as transpositive medical research, transition support and public education programs.” While recognizing that the enabling function of the diagnosis may contribute to “transautonomy” (76), Butler nevertheless consistently supports the contrary view that the diagnosis is a paternalistic form of blackmail with unavoidably negative effects, particularly for children and youth. Even those who use the diagnosis strategically to get what they want are said to risk “internalizing some aspect of the diagnosis, conceiving of [themselves] as mentally ill or ‘failing’ in normality, or both” (82). To be fair, Butler usually frames these concerns as questions. But one could argue that the rhetorical effect of her questions is to minimize the answers given by the pro-GID side of the controversy, answers which receive scant attention in her work. Like Wilchins, Butler believes that the diagnosis unavoidably stigmatizes and pathologizes transsexuals as well as the children on whom it is sometimes imposed, and therefore causes more harm than good.

O’Hartigan offers three major objections to Wilchins in particular, and to these sorts of argument in general. First, she claims that transsexuals are stigmatized whether or not they are diagnosed as gender dysphoric. Instead of attacking the diagnosis, she argues we need to challenge prejudicial attitudes and establish laws against discrimination (45) because removing the diagnosis does not necessarily guarantee that one will prevent the stigmatization of transpersons as mentally disordered. We know that even those transgendered persons who eschew surgery and/or hormones are subject not only to discriminatory attitudes and institutional practices, but also to violence. Moreover, as Namaste argues, reforming or eliminating the diagnosis would have little to no effect on trans prostitutes who are major targets of much of this discrimination and violence.

Second, conceding that the diagnosis *can* be used to pathologize transsexuals, especially in the hands of transphobic medical professionals, O’Hartigan points out that it need not be used in this way. She suggests that “depathologizing GID” (that is, removing it from the DSM¹¹) as advocated by critics like Wilchins would undermine the rationale that enables surgeons to perform SRS through the surgical removal of healthy tissue, and so would as a consequence undermine the claim to insurance coverage and public funding. Indeed, she points out that a poll of surgeons revealed that most would refuse to perform SRS if it was not a medically sanctioned disorder (45). Not unreasonably, then, O’Hartigan argues that the consequences of jeopardizing the availability of SRS outweigh the benefits of removing a potential tool of pathologization, at least for those transsexuals who seek SRS. Other critics would no doubt add

11 The DSM is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Currently in its fourth edition (and so called DSM-IV), transsexuality is listed in it as a “gender identity disorder.”

that removing GID from the DSM is idealist and self-serving. That there might exist any time soon a completely different understanding not only of gender, but also of individuals' unrestricted right to SRS, seems unlikely. Meanwhile, the immediate need to make treatment more accessible to those for whom it is currently unavailable is a concern Butler's analysis does not address.

Contributing to what I am characterizing as a somewhat one-sided reading, Butler claims that GID is "given to people against their will, and it is a diagnosis that has effectively broken the will of many people, especially queer and trans youth" (77). The abuse of the diagnostic tool, especially when misapplied to gay youth or trans youth suspected of being gay, must be measured against its employment by transsexual adults to achieve their goals. Butler suggests that in a society where mental disorders are an excuse to pathologize and stigmatize children and youth, the potential benefits to adult transsexuals are questionable. Moreover, she claims that because the diagnosis has been used to oppress and correct children suspected of being gay, the ability of some adult transsexuals to transition is bought at the expense of gay youth.

O'Hartigan's response to this argument is drawn from the one she makes to Phyllis Burke (1996) who similarly claimed that the GID diagnosis has pitted the protection of gay and trans youth against the needs of adult transsexuals. While deploring the use of the GID diagnosis to "treat" gender-variant children against their will, O'Hartigan argues that these children and youth were subjected to similar forms of abuse before the GID diagnosis was officially recognized (30). Recounting her own experience of electroshock "treatment" under the diagnosis of depression, O'Hartigan argues compellingly that "parents who wish to abuse their gender-variant child will use any diagnosis they want. The problem is abusive parents" (30). She further notes that keeping the GID diagnosis would enable supportive parents to assist their trans child in affirming their identity and acquiring hormone treatment. She argues that GID allows for the "*appropriate* diagnosis and treatment" (45) of trans youth when it is not misused to punish children's lack of conformity to gender norms by transphobic or homophobic parents and doctors. Surely we have an obligation to consider how the GID diagnosis might improve trans lives, and that many other diagnoses have been and continue to be used to oppress trans and gay youth as well.

It is important to note that for Butler, it is not simply a particular use of the diagnosis that leads to pathologization, but the assumptions of the diagnosis itself that "undercut transautonomy" (77) and stigmatize nonconformity. In a passage that simultaneously describes and condemns GID, Butler details its assumptions as if they belong to the diagnosis alone and bear no relation to the assumptions of transsexuals themselves:

It subscribes to forms of psychological assessment which assume that the diagnosed person is affected by forces he or she does not understand. It assumes that there is delusion or dysphoria in such people. It assumes that certain gender norms have not been properly embodied, and that an error and a failure have taken place ... It assumes the language of correction, adaptation, and normalization. (77)

This condemnatory description is deeply problematic on at least two counts.

First, one has to ask whether Butler has given serious consideration to the narratives produced by transsexuals on which these assumptions are based. To offer a few examples, these narratives include: a feeling of being driven by unknown forces (Hewitt 1995: 46); a deep unhappiness with one's ascribed gender (Denny 1991, Griggs 1996: vii, Prosser 1998: 203); an inability to embody norms one feels do not belong to one's gender (Rees 1996: 176, Fry in Bogdan 1974: 72–3); and a belief that an error or a “mismatch” (Rubin 1996: 8, 2003: 150) has been made that can only be corrected via hormones and surgery (Jorgensen 1967: 173, Morris 1974: 26). Are transsexuals being pathologized by a diagnosis imposed upon them by an alien, transphobic medical classification, or is Butler pathologizing transsexuals for refusing to live with a form of gender variance that causes acute unhappiness? Is it the rigidity of gender norms and those who police them that cause distress, a distress that would not exist if cross-gender identification were socially valued? Or is it, as many transsexuals attest, a distress that is born of an experienced incongruity and a desire to belong to a sex category other than that assigned by others?

A second problem is that Butler's implicit criticism of these assumptions curiously flies in the face of many of the poststructuralist and psychoanalytic tenets concerning subjectivity that she appears to embrace elsewhere. If we are not affected by forces beyond our understanding, then neither are we subject to internal conflict or unconscious forces. While transsexuals are not usually considered to be delusional by medical professionals, they are believed to be unhappy with their assigned sex in ways that are described in the diagnosis. How could anyone assume otherwise given their accounts? The complaint that “gender norms have not been properly embodied” (77) is precisely one that is offered by many transsexuals in order to argue for the appropriateness of *alternative* embodiments. Sometimes this complaint is made for strategic purposes. But to attribute these beliefs to strategic purposes alone is to attribute a false consciousness to those whose accounts repeat those beliefs post-transition. The desire to “adapt” the body to the gender with which they identify is what is expressed in the request, whether or not a discourse of normalization is invoked.

Another criticism of Butler's proposal to “undiagnose gender” is that it is based on a queer or transgendered perspective that reflects their experience

of and desire for gender, a perspective that does not necessarily coincide with that of transsexuals. Granting the irony of having to submit to the “regulatory apparatus” required for any official sanction of SRS, Butler’s lament for the conditions of subjection through which this “freedom” is obtained appears to diminish the agency involved in seeking it. But to self-diagnose as transsexual is to embrace this paradox and to accept at least some of the normative constructions of gender on which the GID diagnosis itself is based. One of these normative constructions assumes, falsely in Butler’s opinion, that gender is “a relatively permanent phenomenon” rather than being “a mode of becoming” that fluctuates and changes over time (81). Moreover, she suggests that if we did not have normative gender structures that attribute particular ideals to men and women, and that presume relative stability over time, then we would not have a diagnosis of gender identity disorder either: “it is these very structures that support normalcy that compel the need for the diagnosis to begin with” (90). In her view, the irony is that without the diagnosis there would be no way to secure the transition. Yet in attributing the motivation for diagnosis to normative social constructions alone, Butler eclipses the demand for medical intervention on the part of those transsexuals who claim to experience internal conflict, suffering, and a persistent view of themselves as “the other sex.” And if the meaning of “the other sex” is “not quite clear” (93) in Butler’s mind, it does seem to be clear to many transsexuals. In Butler’s account, to be a transsexual at all, with or without subjection to established medical regulation, is to buy into a normative view of gender. Elsewhere, she states her preference “that transsexuality be a radical epistemic challenge to reigning biological descriptions [rather] than an acceptance of received biological descriptions” (in More 1999: 292). What I find disturbing here is the way that transsexuals’ self-perceptions and their experience of internal conflict are read as effects of their subjection to the “received descriptions” of a “regulatory apparatus” (90), a reading that makes them at best strategic players in a gender order they would otherwise refuse, and at worst dupes of that gender order.

Many transsexuals will find their own assumptions undermined as Butler calls into question the diagnostic assumptions “that gender norms are relatively fixed, and that the problem is making sure that you find the right one, the one that will allow you to feel appropriate” (2004: 95). They may also find less than compelling her fantasy scenario of the transsexual who seeks to transition after having “read a book by Kate Bornstein” or after realizing that changes in social norms have made it seem “really possible and desirable” (81), not because they experience any acute internal distress with the bodies they inhabit. Without dismissing Butler’s idea that for *some* people the realization that sex is assigned may “open up possibilities for reassignment that excite [their] sense of agency, play, and possibility” (98), I suggest that this scenario more likely describes persons who identify as transgendered or queer than transsexual. Indeed,

Butler's ideal gender landscape, where gender is understood as fluctuating and unstable, is more apt to negate transsexual desire altogether by making it incomprehensible. Who would subject themselves to irreversible and painful surgery to secure a different embodiment if the only motivation for doing so were to engage in a sense of play or possibility? And if the sense of play or possibility were to become the accepted criteria for undergoing SRS (either enhancing or eliminating further explorations of gender possibilities), what protection would exist for those persons who may feel deeply confused or even coerced? Surely it is more likely that no irreversible surgery would be required if everyone agreed that gender is never fixed, and that the "other sex" is simply a normative construct, enabling one to shift from one to the other without any intervention at the level of the body. But this concern brings us back to the question of what the ideal gender landscape is from a queer or transgender perspective, and whether or not it includes transsexual goals. On this point, it is reasonable to conclude that even if Butler does not intend to deny transsexual realities, her ideal gender landscape is one in which the desire and experience of many transsexuals make little sense.

Halberstam and the Butch-Ftm Border Wars

In her work on the arguments known as the "border wars" between those who retain sex (butches) and those who change sex (Ftms), Halberstam (1998a) proposes to bring peace to the warring factions by highlighting their similarities and differences. Advocating a "transgender queer" position, her intervention in the theory and politics of trans studies aims to quell the mutual distrust of lesbian feminists (who see Ftms as betraying feminism) and transsexuals (who see butches as failed transsexuals). Refusing a continuum model of masculinity that places butch at one end and Ftm at the other, Halberstam stresses the "wild variability of masculinities," (149) and argues for "documenting [the] distinctive features" of "gender-deviant bodies" (148) rather than privileging some groups as more authentic or more radical than others. In this way, she hopes to open up a space for alternative embodiments of masculinity, specifically for the transgender butch, an identity she insists has much in common with Ftms. Distinguishing her reading of queer from those that "privilege gender fluidity ... as the goal of some ongoing gender rebellion" (147), Halberstam's reading of queer includes a range of non-normative embodiments with their own specificity. Her goal is to enable a coalition politics across multiple communities.

According to Halberstam, queering transsexuality, or any other gender identity for that matter, involves acknowledging the "inherent instability of identity" (1998a: 164). Useful here are Halberstam's efforts to distinguish this instability of identities from their dissolution in some unspecified fluidity:

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many, if not most, sexual and gender identities involve some degree of movement (not free-flowing but very scripted) between bodies, desires, transgressions, and conformities; we do not necessarily shuttle back and forth between sexual roles and practices at will, but we do tend to adjust, accommodate, change, reverse, slide, and move in general between moods and modes of desire. (147)

Far from arguing for the end of gender, or for some androgynous vision of non-specificity, Halberstam insists that “desire has a terrifying precision” and that “desire and gender and sexuality tend to be remarkably rigid” (147). Yet some of these claims appear self-contradictory. In contrast to the qualities of fluidity or fixity that queer and transsexual theorists respectively associate with desire, gender, and sexuality, is Halberstam suggesting that desire, gender, and sexuality should be understood as neither completely fluid nor as completely fixed? Or is she asking us instead to recognize the movement and the nuances within these otherwise rigid formations? The latter request allows Halberstam to preserve the differences (such as those between butches and Ftms), and to emphasize the permeability of the boundaries that mark them. Granting that specific differences exist between transmen and transgender butches (that we are “not all transsexuals”), Halberstam insists that the categories themselves cannot do justice to their internal variation (173).¹² That is, we cannot distinguish between butches and Ftms based on how well they pass or the degree of gender ambiguity they embrace. But if we cannot, then on what basis, if any, can distinctions be made? Can distinctions be made without establishing hierarchies of value?

Part of Halberstam’s political agenda is to undo what she sees as the idealization of transsexuals and the subsequent hierarchy such idealization establishes with respect to other gender variant groups. As she puts it, her aim is “to complicate on the one hand the transsexual models that assign gender deviance only to transsexual bodies and gender normativity to all other bodies, and on the other hand the hetero-normative models that see transsexuality as the solution to gender deviance and homosexuality as a pathological perversion” (153–4). In this double-edged hierarchy, transsexuals are viewed as superior to transgendered or queer persons because they are either more radical or more normative. Noteworthy here is how the hierarchy Halberstam describes contrasts sharply with the hierarchy Namaste criticizes in which transgender/queer persons consider themselves to be more radical. Clearly the conceptualization and valuation of different groups depend upon the standpoint of the observer and are liable to shift as the border wars and other battles shift ground, intensify,

12 In an earlier essay, Halberstam (1994: 212) made the rhetorical claims that “there are no transsexuals,” and that “we are all transsexuals.” She was duly taken to task for blurring the important differences that exist.

or come to an end. The question that interests me here is whether in setting out to undo the dual hierarchies she describes, Halberstam creates another in its place.

Halberstam is right to argue against constructions of transsexuals as radical others (as “dupes of gender”) and of transgendered persons as “dilettantes” who play with gender in a non-serious way (1998a: 165, 167). Such constructions clearly contribute to what she has called the “transsexual model” of the hierarchy, a hierarchy that deserves to be dismantled. The evidence for this model derives in part from Hausman’s critique of transgender discourse. Hausman accuses transgender theorists of promoting “liberal humanist assumptions of self determination” (cited in Halberstam 1998a: 162) and she implies that transgender subjects are less conflicted about their bodies than transsexuals. Additional evidence for the model that privileges transsexuals is based on Rita Felski’s depiction of transsexuals as the subjects who suffer, in contrast to transgender subjects who adopt a more playful relationship to gender (cited in Halberstam 1998a: 167). I agree with Halberstam that these assumptions deserve our critical attention.

More troublesome is the “heteronormative model” Halberstam describes (1998a), where transsexuality is set up as the solution to gender deviance. This model is based on the allegedly homophobic distinctions Ftms make between themselves and butches. In an effort to illustrate the complexity and diversity of butch subjectivity, which clearly shares a similar trajectory to that of transmen who do not seek to “slide seamlessly into manhood” (154), Halberstam relies on a critique of Ftms who define their subjectivity in opposition to butches. In one example, Halberstam reads Mario Martino’s efforts to distinguish himself from butches—a category he associates with female bodies—as a “denigration of the category ‘butch’” (154). But even those Ftms whose experience includes a movement from butch to Ftm differentiate themselves from the “female masculinity” Halberstam refers to in describing transgender butches. In another example, Mark Rees is accused of homophobia for attempting to establish a similar distinction. Rees, who is of course mistaken to assume that all butches are “happy in their gender role” (cited in Halberstam 1998a: 155), could be read as simply trying to justify his own position as transsexual, to come to terms with his own unhappiness, and to reject as inappropriate an identity that others would foist upon him. Is there no legitimate basis for refusing a lesbian identity for oneself without being construed as homophobic? Despite Halberstam’s claim that desire is “terrifyingly precise,” the exercise of these Ftm sexual preferences for heterosexual women and their desires to pass as straight are read by her as potentially homophobic (156). While Halberstam rightly objects to embracing conservative forms of masculinity that are sexist and homophobic, her reading of Rees and Martino in this light strikes me as an unnecessarily defensive one.

A more appropriate critique of homophobia targets Amy Bloom's (1994) analysis of transmen where their masculinity is judged on the basis of her own heterosexist stereotypes. Halberstam correctly identifies the homophobic biases in Bloom, whose text does "serve the cause of hetero-normativity by consigning homosexuality to pathology and by linking transsexuality to a new form of heterosexuality" (157). It does not follow, however, that "making concrete distinctions between butch women and transsexual males" is necessarily a "conservative project" (157), as Halberstam claims. On the contrary, research by Douglas Schrock and Lori Reid (2006: 84) suggests that part of the "identity work" of transsexual transition involves "disaffiliation" from gay and straight expressions of their originally assigned gender. If Rees and Martino seek straight women as partners and reject the category "butch" for themselves, then these preferences could be read as expressions of their own terrifyingly precise desire rather than some deep-seated antipathy for lesbians. To read as homophobic their desire to distance themselves from butch identities is to ignore the context for their doing so, a context which is completely different from that in which Bloom writes.

No one would dispute the fact that some transsexuals ally themselves more closely with those transgendered persons who confound discrete identities and who prefer the unstable or the incoherent. But many, perhaps most, do not. One could argue, then, that Halberstam's arguments against transsexuals' attempts to clarify their identity, and her efforts to "identify some of the dangers in demanding discrete and coherent sexual and gender identities," (1998a: 164) constitute a valorization of transgender identities and politics over those of transsexuals. If so, then Rubin (1996) was correct in predicting that the difficult battle would take place here. It is indeed on this terrain that Halberstam's rhetorical arsenal is most heavily deployed, and where it is least effective.

Halberstam and Rubin know what is at stake on both sides of this rift: the ability to affirm one's own identity as credible both to oneself and to others. But where Rubin appears to allow for multiple strategies, praising the transgender strategy that "legitimizes the existence of alternative sex and gender expressions" (1996: 7), Halberstam insinuates that Rubin does nothing but undermine transgender persons. Attributed to a transgender agenda, the goal of a "world without gender" that Rubin critiques may be too crude a formulation for Halberstam to endorse, but others *do* promote it.¹³ Moreover, one has reason to wonder what goal other than the end of gender might be implied by the ideal of an indeterminate and incoherent sexual and gender identity. Halberstam also takes issue with Rubin's comparison of the politicization of transsexuality to the politicization of lesbians in the 1970s, assuming that the comparison is

13 T. Benjamin Singer (2006: 619, n28) claims this was a slogan for the transgender movement in the 1990s.

intended to distinguish the real from the fake. Whether or not Rubin's analogy is a useful one, his point is not to suggest that transgender persons are lacking in seriousness, as Halberstam assumes, but to demonstrate how the lives of one group can be undermined by the other group arrogating a moral or political high ground to itself.

Castigating both Rubin and Prosser for theorizing the transsexual desire for belonging or for a gender home, Halberstam rejects that which appears to transsexuals as an important signifier of their difference. To what extent does her disdain for this difference construct another hierarchy that privileges transgender desire, bodies, and discourses instead? As Halberstam notes, neither Prosser nor Rubin embrace the "queer hybridity" (1998a: 164) that enables transgender subjects to live without a clear sense of gender home. Rubin believes the "transsexual's quest is distinct in his or her yearning for 'home,' a place of belonging to one sex or the other" (1996: 7). Similarly, Prosser defends transsexuals' desire to belong, and the concept of "home" figures centrally in his discussion of transsexual narratives. While both transsexual authors would agree that some transpersons find ways to live with incongruent and unstable gender identities, they nevertheless insist that for many transsexuals, the search for a gender home is paramount. Yet for Halberstam, because some persons cannot move from one category to another, or do not find the idea of a fixed gender home suitable, others ought to abandon their investment in "comforting but tendentious notions of home" (1998a: 164).

It seems to me that one can only read the desire for home—of moving from embodiments that feel wrong to those that feel right—expressed in many transsexual autobiographies as "tendentious" or biased if that desire is being read as prescriptive, as a solution to all experiences of non-normative gender. Such a prescriptive reading would pose problems for the possibility of coalition politics, as it would exclude or minimize those whose desires lie elsewhere. Yet Halberstam does seem to read the discourse of home in this way, implying that if some persons cannot or will not embrace its terms, then nobody else should either. She further criticizes the concept of home as problematic in its own right due to its association with uses that are colonialist, or due to association with the very real problems that some displaced, migrant persons have with the connotations of home. But why must the longing for home or the desire for belonging, either by transsexuals or by other dislocated persons, come at the expense of others who may live willingly or even unwillingly in exile? Although Halberstam claims not to read Jan Morris's early text as representative of all transsexual autobiographies—a text that clearly suffers from the colonialism, sexism, and classism Halberstam notes—she nevertheless reads Prosser's and Rubin's analyses as tainted by the same biases because they employ the language of home. Granting the importance to some disenfranchised persons of the concept of home, and warning against "identifying either home or

border as the true place of resistance” (1998a: 171), Halberstam nevertheless asserts that Prosser and Rubin “are implicated in the colonial framework that organizes Morris’s account of transsexuality, if only because both texts seem unaware of the discussions of borders and migration that have raged in other theoretical locations” and that these discussions reject “the dialectic of home and border” (170). Certainly Halberstam is right to point out the complex and non-homogeneous identities of transsexuals and to note that race, class, and other social factors will affect their ability to transition as well as the ways in which transition will be conceptualized by self and others. Equally important is her warning to heed the ways in which homophobia, sexism, or colonialism can creep into or cling to the language we use in our efforts to describe experience or specify desires. But if “specificity is all” (173) and transsexuals express a desire to move from a body that feels wrong to one that feels right, then why can’t the specificity of *this* desire be appreciated?

One of Halberstam’s fears is that the metaphor of migration from wrong to right body “merely leaves the politics of stable gender identities, and therefore stable gender hierarchies, completely intact” (1998a: 171). Her rhetoric is very persuasive. But there is an untenable leap here between the desire to correct a perceived incongruity, one that is experienced as unlivable, to a politics of support for the status quo. Why does the desire to belong to a specific gender category imply complicity with the power imbalance that those categories represent as conventionally deployed in a heterosexist gender order? If there is such a thing as alternative masculinities, why are they not available to Ftms as well as to non-trans men?¹⁴ When Halberstam asks, “who ... can afford to dream of a right body? Who believes that such a body exists?” (172), is she not mocking transsexual desires and beliefs? Is she not imputing to them a conservatism that many explicitly reject, or a position of class privilege that many do not possess?

Here I find Halberstam at her least compelling, using her formidable rhetorical skill to argue in favor of a transgender/queer understanding of bodies and identities that purports to embrace diverse expressions even while some are mocked and trivialized. Her suspicion of some transsexual expressions is allegedly because they are implicated in colonialism or homophobia, not because they represent desires that are simply different from and at odds with those of transgender persons. It is also true that these differing desires do not necessarily “produce a radical and oppositional politics” (173). If I understand her correctly, Halberstam’s claim is that the critical capacity to oppose the status quo does not inhere in the fact of gender diversity itself. Rather, it only operates when gender varies in ways that challenge dominant assumptions, including “racial and class constructions of sexual identities and gender identities” (173). Expressions

14 This point was suggested to me by Marc Lafrance, personal communication.

of gender that do not challenge dominant assumptions, or that only challenge them partially or inadvertently, are allotted less value, and are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy of moral and political worth. If the political agenda of this work on border wars renders Halberstam's goal of promoting a coalition politics inaccessible, her more recent work is more promising.

Challenging the Rift

While some of the arguments made on each side of this debate are compelling, others are less so, particularly when they are the result of defensive readings of the other's position. Unfortunately, such misreading has a tendency to reinforce an either/or logic that establishes an unhelpful opposition between transgender and transsexual persons instead of just making distinctions. Non-trans feminists must be wary of this logic, a logic that works powerfully but subtly to lure one into taking sides and that militates against appreciating the different desires, needs, and goals of each group. Supporting one group at the expense of the other may appear to serve some of our feminist ideals, especially if we identify with one group as the underdog. But one-sided support also demands a sacrifice that is difficult to justify insofar as it betrays equally important commitments to respecting the differences without abandoning other critical commitments. There are moments in both Halberstam's recent work and in Rubin's work that challenge this rift or at least hold out the promise of moving the debate along. This challenge will be contrasted with Hausman's (2001) proposal that non-trans feminists should refuse to support either side of the rift on the grounds that neither lives up to the feminist goal of giving up on gender (486).

In her more recent approach to theorizing transgender queer, Halberstam (2005: 20) takes a stand against what she calls "transgressive exceptionalism"—the infighting among groups for moral high ground—that has been central to this rift in both academic and activist circles. Halberstam's more positive engagement here with transsexual theorists marks a significant divergence from her previous work on the border wars, and reveals an effort to undo some of the oppositions that have been set up. Subverting the hierarchy to which even her own work has sometimes contributed, Halberstam claims that "transsexual is not simply the conservative medical term to transgender's transgressive vernacular; instead, both transsexuality and transgenderism shift and change in meaning as well as application *in relation to each other* rather than in relation to a hegemonic medical discourse" (54).

Although Halberstam does not abandon her earlier goal of keeping "transgenderism alive as a meaningful designator of unpredictable gender identities and practices" (2005: 21), she does criticize the ideals of "flexibility" and "infinite diversity" that play into a neoliberal discourse, a discourse that

risks commodifying gender variance (18, 19). Important here is Halberstam's clarification of her earlier position where the flexibility of transgender identities appeared to contest the rigidity of transsexual identities, and to contest the rigidity of desire as she described it. Now Halberstam argues against "the binary division of flexibility or rigidity" (21). With Steve Pile, she argues that "the subjects of resistance are neither fixed nor fluid, but both and more ... resistance is resistance to both fixity and to fluidity" (cited in Halberstam 2005: 21).

Even more significantly, Halberstam abandons her previous antagonistic stance toward Prosser, praising him for helping "us map the theoretical terrain of transgender studies" (50). While continuing to take issue with Prosser's critique of transgender queer for its emphasis on performativity and transgression, Halberstam nonetheless agrees with his objection to the queer misreading of transsexual lives (50–1). Moreover, she appreciates his theorization of what she calls the "fantasy" of gender realness (52), and finds his "understanding of the role of narrative in transsexual self-authorization to be crucial" (52). Although Halberstam's project remains tied to mapping the contours of transgender, a category that "refuses the stability that the term transsexual may offer to some folks, and [that] embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification" (53–4), it is a project that seeks to unearth the histories and narratives of trans people as different from transsexuals, not as morally or politically superior to them. A generous reading of this recent focus is that it goes some distance toward mending the rift, even as it celebrates those "who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity" (55) and those who risk being pathologized or marginalized.

Rubin is another theorist whose work challenges the rift. Cited by Namaste as corroborating her criticisms of queer, gay/lesbian, feminist, and transgender theory, Rubin proves himself an unreliable ally. One of the most sophisticated theorists, Rubin is both critical and self-critical, defending his own preferences while respecting those of others. He takes issue with queer theorists who minimize transsexual claims to stable identities or to heterosexuality, and with feminist theorists who accuse transsexuals of false consciousness or gender conservatism. Nevertheless, Rubin attributes the development of trans theorizing to debates that have occurred between non-trans feminist, queer, and trans communities and that have "made space for alternatives to a single transgender formation" (1999:190). He claims that feminism actually "enabled [his] eventual identification as a transsexual man", and that he has "become a better feminist" since becoming a transman (1998b: 314, 315). Far from any wholesale adoption of essentialist claims, Rubin asks, "how can I account for biology without being a determinist?" (1998b: 318). Employing both genealogical and phenomenological perspectives, Rubin struggles with the essentialist assumptions of his Ftm research participants, attributing those assumptions to

the language available for articulating their experience and to prevailing social discourses about bodies and identities. Accepting a queer emphasis on the social construction of identity, Rubin (2003) nevertheless insists that this emphasis does little to alter the transsexual desire for body modification:

To see that the terms of our identities are social constructs does not translate into the possibility of or the prescription to overcome them. A sense of self is not a will 'o wisp that can be denied, abandoned, or refuted simply because we become aware of its socially constructed nature. As a construct of cultural forces, the deep self is firmly rooted. (182)

Rubin concedes that some Ftms do adopt a queer relation to hegemonic demands for congruence, but in so doing they risk being denied the recognition they seek as men.

Rubin's book provides insight into Ftm masculinity that challenges both Halberstam's earlier accusations of homophobia and Namaste's rejection of the idea that progressive forms of masculinity ought to be queer. Insisting on the heterogeneity of his Ftm participants, Rubin asserts that "transsexualism itself does not necessarily subvert or affirm dominant forms of masculinity. Transsexual men have the potential to generate either alternative or hegemonic forms of masculinity" (2003: 145). Possessing this potential means that transmen are neither conservative nor subversive, a point with which Namaste and Halberstam would concur. However, like many other transmen, Rubin's historical connection with feminism and with lesbian communities suggests a preference for developing alternative masculinities. Perhaps because their lives require them to be more actively engaged in a process of negotiating identities than non-trans men, Ftms have the potential to "redefine the meaning of being a man" (125). In documenting the transsexual trajectories of his participants, Rubin notes that many are "disturbed by hegemonic masculinity. This becomes a significant barrier to achieving an untroubled identification as a man" (124). Like other men who criticize the privilege accorded to hegemonic forms of masculinity, many Ftms are anti-sexist.

In the introduction to his book, Rubin suggests we ask "what matters to people, not what is the matter with them" (2003: 10). Through his work with transmen, he discovers that they are neither misogynist nor homophobic. What matters to them, as revealed through the process of narrative self-authorization Halberstam finds so important, is "dis-identifying" from women, and from lesbians in particular (Rubin 2003: 125, 126). Rubin accounts for the Ftm emphasis on bodily discomfort as "a way of differentiating themselves from other female, especially lesbian, bodies" (2003: 141). Whether or not he is right to suggest that the degree of unhappiness can be used to distinguish trans from non-trans identities, dis-identification from women serves the narrative function

of securing the identification with men his participants seek, and as such this dis-identification may be seen to exemplify the “terrifyingly precise” desire of many Ftms. Rubin’s important theorization of this desire to be recognized as men serves as a caution to those whose desires take other forms, and to those who would reduce such desires to a question of bad politics.

In her impressive examination of transgender theory produced in the 1990s, Hausman concludes there is “at least one basic commonality between the feminist, lesbian and gay, and transgender liberation movements: the demand for basic human rights and personal dignity in difference” (2001: 487). Everything else, however, is up for grabs, including how to secure those rights, how to mark the differences that matter, and how to get others to respect those differences. Hausman points out that *some* trans authors pay insufficient attention to existing inequalities between men and women, inequalities that get overlooked in an ideology that promotes individual freedom to choose one’s gender.¹⁵ But Hausman is mistaken to suggest there is no problematization of male privilege when some prominent Ftm theorists, including Rubin (2003), Hale (1998), and Prosser (1998), clearly advocate alternative masculinities. Hausman’s concern is that most contemporary trans theorists (including their wayward non-trans feminist supporters) view gender as “necessary” or at least “inevitable,” rather than adopt her view that “gender itself exists *only* as a convention” (473).¹⁶ In other words, the transgender view fails to comply with Hausman’s perspective, a perspective she presumes to be the only legitimate or correct perspective for feminism.

Hausman condemns both sides of the rift, claiming that both transgender and transsexual claims are falsely rooted in “gender as a category of experience and being” (2001: 477). Instead, she proposes an “instrumental” use of gender, one that eschews any ontological claims about originating desires or identities, and one that understands gender to be “only a mode of perceiving and experiencing the world that is attributed and narrativized” (476). Hence, transsexual accounts of the experience of gender as formative of self, as well as transgender accounts that celebrate non-conventional or hybrid experiences of gender, are faulted for adhering to some form of gender ontology. Halberstam is criticized for the “extension of gender ontologies into a queer domain” (481), and for attributing radical potential to the expression of non-conventional or incoherent (trans)genders. Moreover, Halberstam and others are accused of failing to problematize gender, by which Hausman means they/we fail to attribute the experience and meaning of gender solely to “the system that ascribes those

15 For a detailed and convincing critique of the libertarian position adopted by Feinberg and others, see Cressida Heyes (2003).

16 For a contrary trans perspective that supports Hausman’s view, see Gilbert 2009.

meanings” (477). Eschewing the sociohistorical reduction of gender to its “epistemological mode” (487), Halberstam’s reliance on new gender categories is destined, in Hausman’s view, to “mire radical gender politics in an ill-defined coalition sensibility” (486).

On the other hand, when we associate Hausman’s view that the solution is to “give up on gender” (486) with her praise for the “moving” photographs of Wilchins as a “gender-neutral individual,” (487) her critique of incoherent gender presentations appears contradictory. If we are to give up on categories of gender identity, then how is it possible, let alone radical, to represent the gender-neutrality of Wilchins? Why are these representations readable when Prosser’s reading of gender specificity in transsexual photographs is deemed impossible? (Hausman 2001: 477). I fail to see how we can dispense with categories of gender whether or not we accept dominant discourses about their normative grounding in the body. Hausman’s praise for the gender-neutral photographs makes little sense without a category of the normative or gender-specific against which to measure its difference. Perhaps it is only because the gender-neutral Wilchins is also photographed at a political demonstration that this image captures Hausman’s attention. In that case, it is not her queering of gender categories that makes her a radical figure, but her political work. On this point I believe both Namaste and Halberstam would agree: who one is, is *not* “more important than the political work that one does” (Hausman 2001: 484).

A person’s identity is also significant in that it has consequences for the kinds of struggles engaged in, and whether one will have the means to wage them at all. As a non-trans feminist, I share Hausman’s struggle against ideologies and practices of normative femininity that make many women unhappy with our lives and with our bodies. What I do not share is her prescriptive view that transpersons ought to adopt the feminist “solution” of “attacking the social system, and not their own bodies, as the origin of the problem of dysphoric sexed embodiment” (477). I believe this view is flawed on three counts: it elides two very different experiences of bodily dissatisfaction; it attributes *all* experiences of dissatisfaction to social systems; and it imposes what may be a political solution for some groups onto other groups whose different needs are not addressed. The “end of gender” that Hausman reads as the only viable feminist goal spells the end of transgender too, as she readily concedes: “Whether transgender theory per se—or the phenomena it describes and theorizes—can continue in the absence of gender ontologies remains to be seen: I don’t know what an anti-ontological transgender theory would be” (2001: 487). Such a view is not markedly different from Janice Raymond’s “solution” of mandating transsexuals out of existence, and it certainly raises the question of how holding such a view could foster respect for the “personal dignity in difference” (487) Hausman appears to support.

REVALUING GENDER DIVERSITY BEYOND THE TS/TG HIERARCHY

In a previous attempt to address this rift in a way that would respect the divergent needs and desires that are expressed in ts/tg theory, Katrina Roen and I offered an alternative feminist perspective (Elliot and Roen 1998). Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic theory, as well as on interviews with transsexuals, we argued that a more complex understanding of embodied subjectivity was needed if transsexuals were to be understood instead of disparaged. With this alternative view, we hoped to create a more constructive analysis of debates between ts/tg, one that included both criticism and respect and avoided imposing a preconceived feminist solution on subjects whose lives pose social and political questions for which there are no easy answers. Working with a concept of embodied experience that is reducible neither to the ontology with which Hausman associates it, nor to the hegemonic constructions of gender that allegedly cause all the problems, we hoped to elucidate some of the complexities at the root of this rift. Over a decade later, there has been an increased theorization and a politicization of these complexities and various attempts to overcome the hierarchies that have been created in the process of assigning meaning to them. Not surprisingly, then, the next rift concerns the question of intelligibility itself.



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Chapter 3

Desire and the “(Un)Becoming Other”¹: The Question of Intelligibility

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler reflects upon what is needed to make new forms of gender possible. Arguing with an unnamed opponent, she asserts that “the thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (2004: 31). The matter of securing a possible life for transgender persons who contest conventional understandings of what constitutes a viable human subject raises the question of intelligibility in the field of gender and embodiment. What we learn from those who do not achieve recognition as intelligible (according to western hegemonic norms) or who do not seek it in the first place is that sustaining the category of intelligible, gendered subject requires relegating whatever appears unintelligible, non-gendered, or differently embodied to the realm of the non-human, the monstrous, or the abject. Margrit Shildrick (2002) suggests that motivating such vilification of the monstrous other is the desire to protect ourselves from our own vulnerability to what is uncertain or unstable in us. Threatened by the strangeness of the other, one response is to disparage the other as somewhat less than human, and to strengthen the boundaries between self and other. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, some feminist responses to transsexuality have been disparaging in this way and transpersons continue to experience the effects of this negativity.

Fortunately, there are other, more productive responses to the question of how or even whether trans bodies are to become intelligible, to whom, and at what cost. At issue here is how to think about the alterity of those non-normative forms of embodiment that challenge normative Western categories of intelligibility. Indeed, the various responses that constitute this rift concern whether or not the existing opposition between the human and/or intelligible on one hand, and the nonhuman and/or unintelligible on the other, can be or ought to be dismantled. Although this debate has been discussed in various ways by a number of trans and non-trans authors, it has intensified following the publication of *Undoing Gender* (2004), where Butler argues for dismantling

1 I gratefully borrow this concept from Nikki Sullivan (2006).

the opposition and argues for the recognition of trans and other marginalized subjects as intelligible. Insofar as many transsexuals seek recognition as men and women, their aim is to achieve intelligibility as such, as opposed to being illegible, unintelligible, or some version of third sex. The recognition of transsexuals as intelligible clearly requires a serious rethinking of current norms for gendered existence in the Western world, based as they are on processes of exclusion that currently relegate transsexual and transgender persons to the outside. In Butler's view, maintaining the dichotomy of intelligible normative genders versus unintelligible transgenders legitimizes the violation of the latter and reinforces the power of the former. Along with Naomi Scheman (1999) and Shildrick, she argues instead that the dichotomy should be transformed by rethinking the boundaries of the human to include the transgendered.

On the other hand, transgender theorists such as Judith Halberstam (2006) and Jean Bobby Noble (2006a, 2006b) argue for maintaining what Kate Bornstein (1994) describes as the "outlaw" position as a means of demonstrating their oppositional potential to the restrictive boundaries of the normative gender order. Butler's call to rethink those boundaries is contested by Halberstam (2006), who claims it is unrealistic and even potentially damaging. At stake for Halberstam is that the differences ts/tg people represent will be co-opted by a form of liberal humanism that legitimizes its others only through eliminating those differences. Thus, while Butler and others seek to transform the normative terms through which unintelligible others are produced, Halberstam and Noble seek to resist those normative terms from a position derived from the outsider status of those unintelligible others. Some questions generated by their different positions include the following: What is gained by embracing the *unintelligible* or the incoherent as alternative forms of embodied identity? Will valuing what has been devalued succeed in problematizing normative categories of human embodiment that currently require excluding those devalued others? Is it possible to argue for intelligibility without endorsing a normative humanist form of subjectivity that excludes important differences? Must those transsexuals who live as women and men be read as capitulating to this normative form? Finally, how might we envision *another* position that would claim both intelligibility *and* unintelligibility, while insisting on the internal complexity of any identity?

If these questions engage feminist and queer theorists of gender as well as ts/tg theorists, it is not because non-trans theorists seek to dictate trans history or monopolize the field as is sometimes feared, but because grappling with these questions demands a rethinking of embodiment. According to Shildrick's theorization of abject bodies (2002: 120), the question of intelligibility emerged recently, not because non-normative embodiments are new, but because poststructuralist, posthumanist, and feminist critiques of the humanist subject as unitary, bounded, white, masculine, and rational have contested the hegemony of this subject. These critical endeavors provide

“the analytic tools to theorise instability and vulnerability,” (120) while the technology for bodily transformation creates new possibilities for inhabiting bodies. Shildrick points out that, far from being disinterested in questions of embodiment that are “never value-neutral,” feminists and poststructuralists have legitimate interests in “not just how new bodies are constructed in discourse, but in the material constitution and effects of those bodies” (120). Clearly these concerns with the unstable and shifting boundaries of the body are simultaneously concerns (both settling, and unsettling) that are central to ts/tg theorists as well. In her overview of transgender studies, Susan Stryker (2006a: 8–9) argues that “transgender phenomena ... point the way to a different understanding of how bodies mean, how representation works, and what counts as legitimate knowledge.” Indeed, for Stryker, transgender as it emerges in the 1990s is a reemergence of earlier phenomena that constituted the “desubjugation” of knowledge that was previously unavailable to scholars. Further, transpersons have produced knowledge about their own lives that had previously been disqualified (12–3). Eschewing the anti-intellectual view that dismisses the importance of theory to the making of social change, Stryker believes that “these philosophical ideas have material consequences for the quality of transgender lives” (9). Insofar as the viability of personal lives is bound up with our understanding of “the category of humanity itself” (Shildrick 2002: 121), then the rethinking of what counts as intelligible bodies or subjects becomes a crucial issue for theoretical debate.²

Before proceeding to my analysis of this debate, I should clarify that my aim is neither to intensify the conflict that already exists, nor to erase it, but to suggest some ways to consider the rather different perspectives and desires at work in competing positions without sacrificing one to the other as so often happens. I will therefore be arguing for transgender lives as both intelligible *and* unintelligible, as bearing a relation to normative subjective formations *and* as contesting those formations in ways that are informative for any critique of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. First, I discuss Halberstam’s and Noble’s emphasis on the unintelligible and incoherent as possible ways to affirm the alterity of trans identities. Then I explore the limits of that position in terms of its ability to transform the unethical practice of securing coherent and intelligible selves for non-trans bodies by abjecting trans bodies. The alternative ethical practice I examine here, developed by Kristeva, Butler, Shildrick, and Sullivan, is

2 Insofar as the category of humanity itself is in question, there are numerous others who are also rendered abject by the Western modernist versions that Shildrick addresses (for example, disabled bodies, racialized bodies, mad bodies). While these others are excluded by a similar logic, and engage in similar struggles against their subordination or neglect, their experience will reflect the effects of the gender order as well, often in ways that overdetermine and complicate their struggles for recognition.

based on confronting the threatening response to “others” and acknowledging the vulnerability that ensues from that confrontation. I also explore the compelling arguments that have been made for recognizing the desire at work in multiple forms of what Sullivan (2006) calls “(un)becoming other,” arguments that complicate the issue of whether one could ever settle on intelligibility or its other side. Persuasive in this context is Robyn Wiegman’s (2006) insistence that the *desire* for gender is operative in all forms of embodiment and in all political projects, including those that imagine they are queering, ending, or transcending gender. With Wiegman, I will suggest that a more promising position might emerge from recognizing the basis of our mutual investments in positions of gender intelligibility or unintelligibility.

For Unintelligibility: In/coherence and the Post-Queer

As Shildrick demonstrates, the dominant process by which intelligible gendered subjects are distinguished from unintelligible subjects is based on securing the stable, bounded, typically white, masculine, coherent self by projecting what is unstable, ambiguously gendered, or incoherent onto non-normative “others” who are considered unintelligible. For those who despair of transforming this process and the dichotomy it produces, an obvious solution is to embrace the *incoherent* and the *illegible* as an integral part of one’s identity. In a recent lecture, Halberstam (2006) criticized Butler’s (2004) proposal to revamp the category human to include those identities that are currently considered unintelligible. In Halberstam’s view, this return to the human constitutes “a heroic and liberal narrative” that is naive in its politics and that departs from Butler’s previous, more radical *critique* of the idea that becoming “intelligible” can be liberating. Halberstam’s view may be rooted in the fear that becoming “legible” requires conformity to the normatively human, to a conformity demanded, for example, by medical or legal gatekeepers at gender clinics. Becoming legible is believed to require stabilization or fixing of identities which otherwise have managed to escape the normalizing discourses of a gender order that regulates not only gender identities but sexual, racial, ethnic, and class identities as well. Halberstam worries, with some justification, that rendering trans a more coherent and legible category risks undermining the capacity of transpersons to oppose the normative. She also fears that making trans legible leads to the imposition of a monolithic concept of trans in non-Western contexts where gender variance may have a completely different set of meanings and functions than in the

Western world.³ Instead of this legibility, Halberstam claims we need "to look at the unintelligible for inspiration." She is not alone.

Following Halberstam's lead, Noble (2006a) also finds inspiration in the unintelligible and in the cultural landscape described as "post-queer." Exemplifying the promise adhering to transpersons in general, and transmen in particular, Noble (15) advocates the "permanent incoherence" they (and he) represent as key to resisting personal and structural constraints of the sex/gender system. While he explicitly hopes to avoid "policing or prescribing or hierarchizing kinds of political embodiment" (99n1), his overall theory clearly privileges the most obvious manifestations of incoherent bodies. These are found in drag kings, who "embody new possibilities for resistance," and queer femmes, whose rejection of "queer and feminist representational practices and political ideas [makes them] the queerest of the queer" (74, 102–3). Indeed, for Noble the promise of transgender, or at least Ftm versions of it, is the *refusal* to move from one sexed position to another. Instead, transgender is said to involve a kind of "grafting" of new bodies onto old, where "one materialization is haunted by the other, as opposed to crossing or exiting" (84).

Based on his self-representation as a "guy who is half lesbian," but wanting to be "seen as male," Noble's (2006a: 80, 82) theory of haunting is compelling as a way to theorize his own experience. It also goes a long way toward revaluing tg/queer embodiments that are often ridiculed or despised. However, the opposition to crossing or exiting genders it promotes may be somewhat less compelling to transsexuals like Henry Rubin or Jay Prosser who seek congruity or a sense of belonging based on achieving a certain coherence. Moreover, those transmen who do not share Noble's view of surgery as necessarily incomplete and who take pride in their ability to physically transition and to live as men, may find the kinds of generalizations Noble offers inappropriate. Elevating his personal experience of gender complexity to the political level, where the refusal of congruence is deemed "most provocative" (3), Noble risks creating dissent among transmen who strive for the alignment of body and identity as well as for the technological means to achieve it. Inverting the hierarchy to devalue the coherent, intelligible subject, he claims that permanent incoherence is required "if the subject is to matter at all" (15). The specificity of trans desires for coherence is not addressed as Noble proceeds from legitimate descriptions of his own experience to more questionable *prescriptions* for Ftm political practice: "intelligibility for the female-to-male trans-sexual man means

3 In her lecture, Halberstam (2006) provided examples of gender diversity from other cultures where the primary goal was economic gain. For a useful discussion of the problems of generalization and imperialism in cross-cultural trans studies, see Towle and Morgan (2006).

contesting the alignment of bodies, genders, and sexualities to force a crisis by grafting articulations onto each other” (84).

To clarify, my point is not to disparage what Noble makes of “post-queer” articulations of his own and others’ expressions of gender or sexuality; it is to signal that privileging them poses problems for *other* expressions of trans. That is, some transmen may find Noble’s idealization of “gender without genitals” (42) and his praise for the image of the “boi” to better reflect his own somewhat oedipal appeal to the feminist/queer mother than their aspirations. Masculinity meets with approval only when performed by trans and queer men who consciously refuse dominant white signifiers of masculinity, as well as any permanent or coherent identity as men (28–9).

Beyond valorizing a particular kind of trans subject, Noble also re-inscribes a series of oppositions between normatively gendered subjects (trans or non-trans) and post-queer trans subjects. The normatively gendered are passive products of, or at least compliant with, a culturally mandated, coherent, fixed, binary gender system that is marked by a belief in identity grounded in a self-evident body. By contrast, post-queer transgendered subjects are the active creators of a counter-cultural practice whose “multiple engenderings” (24) indicate resistance to the normative by exemplifying incoherence, modulation, and the refusal of any clear sense of gender identity or belonging. Engaging in what Julia Serano (2007: 346) calls “subversivism,” Noble (2006a) celebrates those who seek embodiments “so incoherent that they fail to register on our gender maps at all” (130), celebrating the politically subversive quality of their chosen embodiments. “Matter-defying” genders not only contest the biological determinism or essentialism that is attributed to normative genders, but also they are said to reside “outside of sexual difference” (42) in a “post-queer” landscape that has little tolerance for more conventional gender-specific desires. They “embody and perform gender difference” (17n1) consciously, and without reference to a sexed body.

In Noble’s view, the intelligibility sought by those transsexuals who do not share post-queer desires is bought at the price of creating a false coherence, a coherence offered by the gender identity clinics and the discourses that support them. Transsexual desires for coherence are thus allegedly based on buying into the “alibi of gender essence” (17n1), an alibi offered by a normalizing power determined to refuse the incoherence that Ftm transsexuals otherwise embody.⁴ Halberstam’s and Noble’s valorization of the unintelligible, while clearly privileging transgender desires for incoherence over transsexual desires for coherence, also raises two larger questions concerning its political efficacy

4 No wonder Salah (2007a) believes the new gender politics idealizes particularly masculine transgender embodiments at the expense of Ftm and Mtf transsexuals who desire their bodies and their genders to cohere.

for transforming normative conceptions of embodiment. First, is it possible to dismantle the existing hierarchy between the intelligible and the unintelligible while holding onto these concepts as a basis for meaningful opposition to the status quo? Second, what becomes of Halberstam's earlier claim that we need to "examine the strangeness of all gendered bodies" (1994: 226) while advocating the more radical potential of those deemed unintelligible?

One persuasive reason for valorizing the unintelligible or incoherent is that the perceived alternative threatens to swallow up important differences in some humanistic model of identity. The problem with humanism is that it professes to include or to represent everyone while in practice defining the human on the basis of some privileged groups against whom all others are negatively defined. However, in what I will read as a *departure* from this humanist model, Butler and others urge us to rethink the human in the interest of those unintelligible others. If what is human is a potential for multiple forms of gender and embodiment, including transsexual desires for coherence and transition as well as transgender desires for incoherence and ambiguity, then any gender order that thwarts or punishes this potential will be damaging, particularly to those who are least able to abide its normative ideals.⁵ Thus, to advocate rethinking the boundaries of the human is to advocate an alternative ethical response to the abjection of gender variant others, one that eschews their celebration as unintelligible; it is to advocate *for* the intelligibility of (un)becoming other.

Undoing Abjection: For the Intelligibility of (Un)Becoming Other

Debates over the question of intelligibility have been at the heart of what Butler (2004: 4) calls "the new gender politics," where the newness suggests renewed political challenges to the foundations of the hegemonic gender order previously attacked by feminists as well as by gay, lesbian, and queer theorists. The earlier crisis of sexual difference theorized by Kristeva (1981a, 1981b, 1982) and based on challenges to the abjection of the feminine has been extended by queer theory's attack on the heteronormative social and psychic organization that abjects queer subjects as well. These crises in the hegemonic order of gender and sexuality are further complicated by a crisis of embodiment, a crisis of

5 The devotion of contemporary gender studies to illustrating the routine exercise of disciplinary power in inducing compliance to gender norms demonstrates the lack of any naturally intelligible gender and the need to construct it through a variety of practices, inducements, and punishments. The hegemonic gender order described by Western sociologists such as R.W. Connell (1987, 2002) is clearly based on questionable assumptions about the properties of gender itself, assumptions that trans and intersexed persons have proven false by virtue of their very existence.

signification which calls into question not just the formation or meaning of gender and sexual identities, but also the ways in which bodies are materialized in relation to (or in disjunction from) those identities. Intended or not, the transgender, transsexual, and intersex movements Butler places at the center of the new gender politics operate on a decidedly queer and feminist terrain insofar as they collectively challenge dominant assumptions concerning the relation between signifiers of gender and sexed bodies. In analyzing their atypical embodiments, trans and intersex theorists break new ground, questioning analytic frameworks that tend to take for granted the stability of gender or sexed bodies, or both. Their analyses reveal how they come to inhabit the “abject” (Kristeva 1982), “monstrous” (Shildrick 2002), “unviable” (Butler 2004), or “incoherent” (Noble 2006a) bodies that are the lively and important focus of feminist, queer, and trans debate.

Without diminishing the novelty or import of the transgender response to the crisis of signification discussed above, I turn now to an alternative response developed by feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theorists, one that engages the problematic dynamics at work in structurally similar subject positions. This alternative response is derived from Kristeva’s critique of the social processes through which some forms of self are constructed as coherent and intelligible while others are abjected as incoherent and unintelligible. Her analysis of the social order as sacrificial and her suggestions for transforming it are useful for challenging hierarchical formations of gender, as well as of sexuality and embodiment. The relevance of her ideas for theorizing non-trans relationships to trans persons is clarified through their elaboration by Butler (1993, 2004), Shildrick (2002), and Sullivan (2006), all of whom advocate confronting the threatening response to “others” and acknowledging the vulnerability that ensues from that confrontation. Like Halberstam and Noble, the latter promote an ethics based on recognition and respect for what is “irreconcilable” (Kristeva 1991: 182), “uncertain” (Shildrick 2002: 132), or “other” (Butler, Sullivan). But unlike Halberstam and Noble, they argue this ethics must include recognizing what is irreconcilable, uncertain, or other in all subjects, not just in trans subjects.

Kristeva’s theory of gender oppression is based on an analysis of the process of abjecting the feminine in what she calls the sacrificial “sociosymbolic order” of the West. While the social order as a whole clearly sacrifices not only women, but also other “others” such as racialized, disabled, and transgender others, Kristeva’s theory of abjection lends itself to an understanding of other marginalized subjects as well. Abjection is an archaic psychological process through which the boundaries of the self are secured by rejecting whatever “disturbs identity, system, order” (1982: 4), but it is a process we are likely to repeat in the realm of the social whenever we feel threatened. For Kristeva, abjection of the feminine belongs not to biology, but to the cultural and historical processes

through which sexual difference finds its meaning. The sacrificial gender order is one where principles of order, singularity, homogeneity, stability, and boundedness have been represented by masculinity (specifically by white, able-bodied, non-trans men), whereas the contrary, threatening principles of disorder, heterogeneity, instability have been projected onto the feminine.⁶ But the social order as a whole includes the sacrifice not only of women, but also of other "others" such as racialized, disabled, intersex, and transpersons. Kristeva maintains that psychic investment in this social order enables one to avoid the sense of loss, uncertainty, or vulnerability that is part of human existence. Because the impetus to deny loss and vulnerability is universal, there is a motive to *support* the sacrificial social order even when one is the victim or scapegoat of that order. This psychic investment explains why transforming the social order requires more than a simple negation; it also requires an ethical commitment to accepting the vulnerability that its sacrificial form enables us to avoid.

For Kristeva, challenging the sacrificial social order requires "negativity plus ethics" (1981a: 138). That is, one would have to recognize and oppose its sacrificial form (the negativity) as well as to avoid reproducing the sacrifice by projecting its rejected elements onto others (the ethics). In analyzing the crisis of sexual difference, Kristeva argues that rather than entrenching it in the oppositional and hierarchical valuation of masculine and feminine, what is needed instead is the internalization of that difference. The ethics of sexual difference requires an understanding that every identity involves loss, and that each sex needs to confront what it excludes. The point is to incorporate that alterity instead of projecting it onto a sexual other: "This process could be summarized as an *interiorization of the founding separation of the sociosymbolic contract*, as an introduction of its cutting edge into the very interior of every identity" (1981b: 34). A non-sacrificial gender order would be possible if everyone incorporated the heterogeneous and threatening elements it currently projects onto women (or, I would add, onto other others such as queer or transpersons). Of course, the scapegoats of the social order are more strongly motivated than its valued subjects to promote a non-sacrificial social order. But Kristeva warns that a non-sacrificial order cannot be based on celebrating the threatening elements associated with abjected others. Rather, transcending abjection entails challenging the dominant rationality that construes those elements as threatening, unintelligible, and non-human, instead of accepting them as part of what constitutes the human. Applied to Kristeva's example of abjected femininity, this means that if women simply accept what has been projected onto us as truth, then such acceptance will entrench the existing sexual divisions and the sacrificial status of the feminine. But neither can we reject what has

6 For her theory of the sociosymbolic order, see Kristeva (1981a and 1981b). For a longer discussion of her theory, see Elliot (1991: Chapter 6).

been projected onto us, because that would reinforce the repression of conflict, heterogeneity and instability on which the hegemony of the social order and its masculine subjects depend. The goal is to refuse the sacrificial constitution of the social order by confronting it with what it has excluded, repressed, silenced, and banished.

Insofar as trans subjects are victims of a similar process of abjection, they may find Kristeva's theory provides a caution against assuming those elements that are similarly projected onto them by a sacrificial social order. Celebration of the principles of unintelligibility or incoherence such an order would deny as non-human could constitute a useful reclaiming of what has been sacrificed as long as such celebration avoids reinforcing the sacrificial structure by arrogating such principles to itself. What we learn from Kristeva is that whenever some designated others (women, queer, or transpersons) come to represent what allegedly coherent subjects are encouraged to deny in themselves, part of our human reality is sacrificed. Alternatively, an identification with intelligible, stable, coherent subjectivity risks avoiding the same sense of loss and vulnerability that constructs normative subjects precisely through repudiating those who are unable or unwilling to embrace those identities. Further elaboration of Kristeva's insights by Butler and Shildrick will make their relevance to trans embodiments clearer.

In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler raises the political question she will later (2004) revisit: How do we contest a dominant gender order that produces coherent identity positions for some by excluding others as incoherent and unviable? Exploring the problematic relationship of bodies to sexuality and to gender, Butler describes how normative heterosexual identities are secured through a process of repudiation by which "figures of homosexualized abjection" are excluded (1993: 109). In an interesting parallel with Noble's theory, Butler notes it is those "figures of homosexualized abjection" that represent a complex plurality of (im)possible positions against which the normative subject defines itself, and by which it remains threatened. The normative subject remains threatened because in order to preserve the phantasy of its coherence, it must identify with those abject others it is also required to disavow (1993: 112). Thus, Butler suggests, "it may be only by risking the *incoherence* of identity that connection [that is, between non-normative subjects and their others] is possible" (1993: 113). Since all coherent identities are based on exclusions and disavowals, the point is not to multiply them, not to include multiple subject positions within what is the normative domain, even though one may call for their recognition in terms of securing rights. One of the problems with the attempt to incorporate differences into a unity is that such an effort plays into a "romantic, insidious, and all-consuming humanism" (1993: 116) while excluding its other "others." And the problem with their multiplication is that it risks denying the complexity internal to or constituent of their differences:

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The insistence on coherent identity as a point of departure presumes that what a "subject" is is already known, already fixed, and that that ready-made subject might enter the world to renegotiate its place. But if that very subject produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity, the crossings of identifications of which it is itself composed, then that subject forecloses the kinds of contestatory connections that might democratize the field of its own operation. (115)

Like Kristeva, and in ways that bear on the respective desires of some transsexuals for coherence and of some transgenders for incoherence, what Butler finds politically promising is that "certain claims extend the boundaries of the symbolic itself" (1993: 114). These boundaries are challenged by calling into question what the symbolic order excludes, and by forcing reflection on the processes through which its normative form is established. But if she argues against adopting more coherent identities, all of which have their own exclusions, she also argues against *identifying* with what has been disavowed and projected onto non-normative subjects. Instead, Butler's aim is to examine what various excluded positions might have in common with each other. She questions "whether a political insistence on coherent identities can ever be the basis on which a crossing over into political alliance with other subordinated groups can take place," (115) not least because they are already the product of other exclusionary processes.

Butler's objection to the proliferation of (coherent) identity positions promoted by identity politics is that it leads to the policing of identity. Instead, her goal is to promote "a broader cultural struggle toward the rearticulation and empowerment of groups that seeks to overcome the dynamic of repudiation and exclusion by which 'coherent subjects' are constituted" (1993: 117). In other words, Butler is promoting an anti-sacrificial social order by urging alliances among marginalized or excluded groups who challenge normative identity formations. Insofar as viable subjects are secured at the expense of abjecting the non-normative, the point is not to insist on sameness, but to develop what she calls "an economy of difference:" "an economy of difference is in order in which the matrices, the crossroads at which various identifications are formed and displaced, force a reworking of that logic of non-contradiction by which one identification is always and only purchased at the expense of another" (118).

Prescient here is Butler's warning that any coalition that "requires one identification at the expense of another thereby inevitably produces a violent rift, a dissension that will come to tear apart the identity wrought through the violence of exclusion" (1993: 118). Is this not precisely the problem when queer or even "post-queer" (Noble 2006a) comes to represent for transgendered persons the required identity with which to combat the heteronormativities of

the culturally intelligible subject? Can this problem be rectified by celebrating incoherence or unintelligibility? For Butler, while it is important to recognize various identities that fall outside the normative, what must be avoided is making “the articulation of ever more specified identities into the aim of political activism” (118). Following the anti-sacrificial ethics Kristeva describes, Butler also recommends “tracing the ways in which identification is implicated in what it excludes” (119). In other words, the important thing is to recognize when cultural viability has been secured through the subordination of others and to expose the “fictions of an imperialist humanism that works through unmarked privilege” (118). A decade later, the political demands of the new gender movements compel a return to the question of intelligibility and provide the opportunity to pursue the project of legitimizing complexity.

Legitimizing Complexity

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler’s project is to discover ways to extend the range of social recognition of “viable subjects” to those trans and queer persons who were previously deemed unviable, unworthy of respect, dignity, and protection from violence. Such recognition involves two interdependent processes. One process requires developing an ethical capacity to recognize as fellow human beings those whose bodies, genders, or sexualities are visibly configured in unconventional ways. The other process requires an “undoing” of existing normative assumptions about gender. The two are interlinked.

Calling for the “alteration of norms” that dictate acceptable forms of human morphology, Butler argues that trans lives already have an impact on social and political life insofar as they challenge “who counts as a human” (28). For Butler, reworking the norms of gender is simultaneously a “reconstituting of the human,” especially for those who have been made to represent a less-than-human other, or worse, an inhuman impossibility against which a normative humanity has been defined (30). Here she is clearly advocating the legitimation of forms of gender and embodiment that have hitherto been relegated to the realm of the unreal, as opposed to prescribing new norms of gender:

I would say that it is not a question merely of producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist. The genders I have in mind have been in existence for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms that govern reality. So it is a question of developing within law, psychiatry, social, and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living for a long time. (31)

For Butler, legitimizing complexity is one way to undo assumptions about an allegedly given, normal, or natural gender order; it is a process based on the recognition of those others who have been relegated to the outside.

Other theoretical engagements with this process of legitimizing complexity are useful in extending Butler's analysis of it in ways that are relevant to my discussion here. A brief detour through Biddy Martin's (1994) critique of queer theory and Naomi Scheman's (1999) analysis of trans debates will help demonstrate the importance of legitimizing complexity as a central strategy for problematizing normative claims.

Martin argues that what we take to be normative is already an idealized fiction of unity because *all* gender identities are multiple and complex (108). This complexity is not solely attributable to the differences created by race, class, and ability, which are often the only ones examined, and which tend to treat both hegemonic and subordinate identities as monolithic. With Butler (1990), Martin suggests that if normative identities are not *determined* by the structuring presence of norms, given that processes of identification may involve the subversion, refusal, or creative reconfiguration of existing norms, then there is no easy demarcation of their inside from their outside. What is required instead is a more nuanced understanding of the relation of *any* person to the structuring norms of gender (Martin 1994: 113). Moreover, in a twist that deepens the analysis considerably, she claims that too much weight has been given to the power of gender norms to create intelligibility in the first place and that there is no such thing as "total intelligibility" (119). Martin's analysis adds another dimension to the question of intelligibility by querying the extent to which other factors such as bodily limitations and psychic experience play a role in the construction of subjective identity. Her view is that we need to preserve the conceptual difference between our psychic experience of the body on one hand, and social and political injunctions on the other. Preserving the difference acts as a caution against an overzealous social constructionist tendency to posit "always already and thoroughly gendered bodies/psyches" and allows for considerations of psychic complexity that otherwise receive so little attention (118).

Scheman explicitly intervenes in trans debates by offering detailed and persuasive arguments for dismantling the opposition between the normative or human center and the marginal. Refusing both those who advocate a liberal humanist incorporation of marginal others (where others are viewed as basically the same) and those who advocate romanticizing the marginal (where others are viewed as radically distinct and dissimilar), Scheman's proposal is to "queer the center" (1999: 61). Queering the center has the dual effect of revealing the abjected other as part of the human and revealing how the center itself is constructed as normal based on concepts of nature and moral virtue (64). Scheman argues that both the desire to belong to the normative center and the

desire to position oneself outside of it imply acceptance of the structures of normalization and occlude their historical construction and contestability. Thus, instead of celebrating the incoherence that is almost exclusively attributed to marginalized subjects (including transgender subjects), Scheman proposes we “destabilize the center” by examining “normative incoherence” (68).⁷ This proposal enables us to avoid idealizing the incoherence and the multiplicity of marginalized subjects as something completely other, alien or strange, even while looking to their experience as providing “alternative models of subjectivity” (92). Like Butler, she argues that “taking such experiences as paradigmatic of the human can both shatter the illusions of the naturalness of privilege and offer ways out of the constraints of its normativities” (92).

Scheman’s insistence on recognizing as human those others designated non-human returns us to the important place the ethics of recognition occupy in Butler’s project. Undoing gender by legitimizing complexity instead of relegating it to those marginalized others who have allegedly failed to achieve a singular gender identity is at the same time a kind of redoing. Such redoing requires rethinking everyone’s embodied relation to existing structures of gender, and an acknowledgment of the psychic complexity and ambivalence that underlies and troubles that relation. As Butler is aware, such redoing must contend with entrenched resistance to social and personal change. This is why her call for an ethics of recognition is necessary for transforming the social and psychic conditions that perpetuate and legitimize violence against those who refuse to embody dominant gender norms or identities. In Butler’s view, those who enact violence are defensively supporting hegemonic structures of gender that are taken to be natural and inevitable, structures whose effect is to render their own identities not only legible but definitive of what is human. Moreover, as we know from sociological theories about the everyday understanding of gender as formulated by Harold Garfinkel (1967), the normative gender order does not acknowledge complexity or change insofar as it is assumed to be based on what is natural. The taken-for-granted assumptions about gender that Garfinkel called the “natural attitude” include the following assumptions: that there are only two genders; that one’s gender is invariant; and that membership in one or the other category is natural.⁸

7 Scheman’s proposal differs from the celebration of either trans incoherence or heterosexual incoherence as addressed by Noble (2006a) insofar as Scheman suggests that incoherence is endemic to normative constructions themselves.

8 Kessler and McKenna (1978: 113–4) supply a succinct list of these assumptions as follows: 1. There are two, and only two genders; 2. One’s gender is invariant; 3. Genitals are the essential sign of gender; 4. Any exceptions to two genders are not to be taken seriously; 5. There are no transfers from one gender to another except ceremonial ones; 6. Everyone must be classified as a member of one gender or another; 7. The

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Clearly, transsexual, transgender, and intersex persons challenge at least some assumptions of the natural attitude and therefore they are often read as unnatural or less than human. In order to maintain its hegemony, the normative gender order must be shored up continually through the repudiation of whatever threatens its claim to represent the human: "The effort to enforce the boundaries of what will be regarded as real requires stalling what is contingent, frail, open to fundamental transformation in the gendered order of things" (Butler 2004: 35). In Butler's view, one cannot successfully oppose this structure or one's investment in it through recourse of appeals to nature or through advocating a defiant celebration of those deemed unintelligible. Rather, the ethical alternative requires that we

learn to live and to embrace the destruction and rearticulation of the human in the name of a more capacious and, finally, less violent world, not knowing in advance what precise form our humanness does and will take. It means we must be open to its permutations, in the name of nonviolence." (35)

If, as Martin, Scheman, and Butler suggest, what is human is inherently complex and open to myriad forms of embodiment, then the belief in immutable categories of normative identity cannot be maintained without violence. Cressida Heyes (2007: 120) points out that such violence may result from the allegiance to "gender dualism" on the part of those who benefit from and those who are wounded by this dualism. While the violent response to trans bodies is based on a defensive abjection of those others who threaten normative boundaries, the ethical, non-violent response advocated by Martin, Scheman, and Butler is based on an ability to reconsider those boundaries as contingent and malleable (Butler 2004: 35). For Butler, this ethical response enables an encounter with "others" that remains welcoming of otherness:

The nonviolent response lives with its unknowingness about the Other in the face of the Other, since sustaining the bond that the question opens is finally more valuable than knowing in advance what holds us in common, as if we already have all the resources we need to know what defines the human, what its future life might be. (35)

I do not mean to suggest that Butler holds all the solutions, or that the political and theoretical strategies developed by transpersons to resist their relegation to the non-human are unimportant. On the contrary, these strategies remain

male/female dichotomy is a "natural" one; 8. Membership in one gender or another is "natural." Obviously, these assumptions militate against theorizing the complexity I advocate throughout my analysis.

indispensable to creating alternative social structures and practices that value trans lives. I am suggesting that additional work is needed on the part of non-transpersons to undo the abjection of trans bodies. Butler's dual strategy of undoing gender and of promoting an ethics of recognition, Martin's critique of normative claims to intelligibility, and Scheman's queering of the normative center all work to disrupt the opposition that establishes and then privileges those deemed normative or intelligible over those deemed unintelligible or nonhuman.⁹ These theories are important in placing responsibility on those who support social norms and institutional practices that falsely appropriate humanity to themselves. They are also useful in suggesting that psychical changes are required to enable a nonviolent response on the part of those who are threatened by the diversity and complexity that exists. The political solutions transpersons propose, including ending violence and discrimination, decriminalizing prostitution, and improving access to health care (Namaste 2005), are unlikely to be achieved without addressing the ethical openness to alterity such solutions entail. Shildrick and Sullivan both contribute to this ethical project in ways that are particularly attentive to the negation of differences not only in the other, but also within the self.

An Ethics of Embodiment

Shildrick's (2002) compelling analysis of human vulnerability and its denial extends in significant ways the theoretical ground of abjection she acknowledges sharing with Kristeva and Butler. Like Kristeva and Butler, Shildrick warns against the vilification of abjected others and reveals the false sense of security normative subjects gain through this process. For Shildrick, it is the figure of the monster that occupies the place of the abject, and her central focus extends beyond gender and sexuality to differences of embodiment, making it especially helpful for thinking about trans embodiment. Following Derrida, her critique of the dominant Western logos centers on its requirement to abject what are considered monstrously embodied others. The result is to secure "acculturated" subjects whose sense of autonomy, stability, predictability, and self-transparency

9 Trish Salah (2006) argues that in failing to address transsexual prostitutes, heterosexual transsexuals, and her own critics, Butler's claim to dismantle boundaries between the human and the nonhuman is disingenuous, or at least based on privileged indifference. I would argue instead that Butler needs to deepen her analysis to address these concerns in order to be consistent with her own ideals.

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rests on a claim to invulnerability that founds the familiar rational, White, masculine, but disembodied subject (51–67).¹⁰

Despite the obvious similarities that exist among theorists of abjection, Shildrick's analysis is particularly adept at implicating us not just in the denial of whatever is considered to be radically other, but also in the denial of those excessive, vulnerable, non-stable elements of the self, which must then be attributed to monstrous others (68):

What is really unsettling about non-normative embodiment is not simply the reminder of the empirical instability of all bodies, but the intuition that despite the privileging of mind in western discourse, our embodied selfhood is a matter of complex interweaving. Whenever the body is at risk, it is the stability of the self that is threatened. (75)

The ethical response she advocates is not only to revalue those "monstrous others" who are unsettling by virtue of their non-normative corporealities, but also to rethink "the nature of embodiment itself" (2).

What interests me here is Shildrick's emphasis on the psychic work that is required either to sustain or to challenge the boundaries of normative subjectivity. She argues that such boundaries should be understood as permeable if we are to develop an ethical relationship to differently embodied others:

What is at stake is the impossible desire for transcendence, and the denial of the impure and uncontrollable materiality in which all of us find our existence, and that renders the subject always already vulnerable. What makes the other monstrous is not so much its morphological difference and *un*familiarity, as the disturbing threat of its return ... Monsters haunt us, not because they represent an external threat ... but because they stir recognition within, a sense of our openness and vulnerability that western discourse insists on covering over. (80–1)

Shildrick's commitment to the paradox of embodied being as that which is simultaneously bounded by limits *and* haunted by inevitable psychic and physical breaches to those limits is a useful reminder of the futility and harmfulness of embracing one side of the paradox at the expense of the other. That is, while some boundaries are necessary to protect us from being used by others, or from using others, such boundaries need not be sustained through the violent abjection of those who represent the inherent instability, dependency, and

10 One would be mistaken to accuse Shildrick of denigrating feminine, queer, disabled, or transpersons as monstrous. Her claims are that they have historically been designated as such in order to protect normative subjects, and that to ignore this history prevents us from grasping key aspects of their lived experiences.

vulnerability of the self. Shildrick's ethical injunction to "embody the monster" is therefore an injunction to recognize that "monsters constitute an undecidable absent presence at the heart of human being" (54). What does this mean, and how is it relevant for thinking about trans identities?

If monsters are not simply those others we exclude as non-human, but haunt the very heart of human being, then acknowledging that otherness in ourselves requires an acceptance of our own vulnerability: "Whatever its form, the other is always the signifier of a difference that speaks to the non-self-sufficiency of the singular subject, an unwelcome reminder of inherent vulnerability" (131). It is the ongoing denial of otherness, the taming of the strangeness both in self and in others that preserves the humanist subject as invulnerable. With Kristeva, Shildrick advocates an incorporation of what has been excluded as other rather than its denial and ongoing persecution:

To resist closure, to be open to the trace of the other within, the other that is both self and irreducibly alien in its excess, to resist the normalisation of the strange, is to accept vulnerability. It is the very possibility of our becoming, for ourselves and with others, and it commands us to give up the comfort of familiarity and willingly embrace the risky ethics of uncertainty. (132)

Shildrick's fear is that strategies of normalizing the monstrous other through assimilation or suppression of its strangeness, and strategies of identification that insist on its discrete alterity, will both fail to acknowledge the presence of the otherness within.¹¹

Although Shildrick does not explicitly address the question of intelligibility as it relates to trans subjects, she nevertheless contributes to this question in ways that are enormously suggestive. Keeping in mind that her project is to develop "a new form of ethics that answers more fully to the multiplicity of embodied difference" (3), it is one that offers an alternative to existing ways of thinking embodiment that rely on oppositional and defensive strategies. Insofar as trans bodies represent instances of otherness that must be abjected to preserve an image of normative bodies, it is the formers' embodiment of incongruous sex and gender that calls into question the supposedly natural congruity of the latter. Given the dominant assumptions about proper human embodiment, the logical options for transpersons are to deny their experience (this often leads to their literal undoing), or to modify the body (as many transsexuals do), or to embrace the incongruity as definitive of their alternative, anti-normative identity (as many transgenders do). In my view, only the first option is an attempt to

11 Those who work in the psychoanalytic tradition will be more familiar with the concept of a divided self. Kristeva argues for the importance of acknowledging this internal division in her aptly titled book, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991).

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normalize the strange, based on a (usually unsuccessful) denial of difference in oneself. The other two are ways to honor the strangeness through divergent responses to alternative psychic investments which constitute two different relationships to norms of embodiment.

If we grant Shildrick's description of monstrous bodies as those where "boundaries of embodied selfhood are uncertain or plainly breached" (51), then we can read both the crossing and the blurring of those boundaries as ways to make one's experience of gender livable based on differently configured desires. Both transsexual and transgender positions reveal the uncertainty of assuming a natural coincidence of sex and gender, and both represent significant challenges to the hegemonic gender order. This view takes issue with claims that transsexuals are not engaged in practices of self-transformation that "invite becoming something new" (Heyes 2007: 119), and with their implication that the desire to transition requires abandoning a critical relationship to normative gender behaviors and ideals. Perhaps more caution is needed here to prevent a feminist and/or queer antipathy to oppressive gender prescriptions from clouding our thinking about transsexual desires to inhabit the bodies that secure, if not their happiness, then at least the same relative degree of comfort that most non-transpersons experience.¹²

Of course, the ethics developed by both Shildrick and Kristeva apply to transsexuals as well, including the formers' critique of the idea that conventional gender boundaries are *determined* by the specificity of one's bodily difference. Participation in the rethinking of embodiment that is at the heart of this ethics would require that transsexuals, like everyone else, avoid replicating the abjection of others that founds the phantasmatic security of the normative ideal. This means that the transsexual critique of transgender or queer forms of embodiment as inappropriate, not only for them but also for others, risks participating in a form of abjection. But my intention here is not to place the ethical burden of avoiding abjection uniquely on transsexuals who are sometimes *misread* as perpetuating such abjection along with normative gender ideals. Shildrick suggests that normative subjects have the most to risk in acknowledging the inherent vulnerability of the subject (that is, all the defenses that maintain their claim to normative subjectivity). But would the acknowledgment of inherent vulnerability not pose other sorts of difficulties for those who are repeatedly made to represent that vulnerability for others at the expense of their own desires and of their own identities?

12 I remain troubled by the analogy drawn between women's struggles with gender norms and trans struggles with sexed embodiment. While both struggles have profound effects on one's sense of well-being, they strike me as sufficiently different from each other to render comparisons highly problematic. I return to this problem in my Conclusion.

The willingness to embrace incoherence and ambiguity suggests that transgender persons may be better able to tolerate the uncertain boundaries of self and body that cause anxiety for many transsexuals, as well as for many non-trans subjects. Clearly there is much to admire in the alternative and hybrid genders embodied by transgender persons who epitomize a longstanding feminist and queer rebellion against conventional gender. Yet our very fascination with overcoming boundaries of sex and gender might alert us to the same underlying phantasy that Shildrick claims plagues normative embodiments: Is embracing the unintelligible, the incoherent, and the sexually indistinct a way to acknowledge inherent vulnerability, or is it a way to negate it? An additional concern is that in assuming the oppositional position of the unintelligible other, transgender subjects come to embody those principles of disorder and incoherence that are projected onto them by a social order that establishes a sense of order, coherence, and limits through this process. As I suggested earlier with reference to celebrations of this anti-normative position, it is one that does little to disrupt the operation of a normative gender order. In celebrating its own hybrid form of embodiment, this position neither advocates nor requires rethinking embodiment in general. Finally, and despite the useful creation of livable spaces for some, the transgender dependence on a negative relationship to coherence, boundaries, or distinctions (especially when such negativity is prescribed) renders encounters with others particularly fraught.

The difficulties revealed through applying Shildrick's analysis of intelligibility and abjection to trans embodiments do not preclude but welcome possibilities for further ethical encounters. Hoping to overcome the oppositions "between the normal and the strange, between conformity and transgression, between being and becoming, and between self and other" (2006: 562), Sullivan contributes to this project. Echoing Shildrick's claim that the monstrous other needs to be embodied, Sullivan's "ethics of transmogrification" (563) signifies *not* the monstrous becoming of non-normative *others*, but the processes of (un)becoming other in which we all participate. Taking Stryker's point "that all bodies are unnatural, created, formed and transformed in and through modificatory processes" (558), Sullivan urges the development of a radical ethics aimed at embracing one's *own* strangeness as well as that of others, an ethics of "(un)becoming other."

What I find particularly important in Sullivan's work are the critical questions she poses concerning different practices of body modification and how they are read by others. Paraphrasing Sullivan (2006: 556–63), these questions include:

Are some forms of body modification radical or transgressive (because anti-normative) and others bad or conformist (because they seek to embody cultural ideals)? Even if some persons use normative medical discourses or tools like surgery to mark their bodies, does this necessarily make them victims of those

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discourses or tools? What happens to agency and self-perception when one's body modification practices are interpreted as self-harm or victimization, and when are they seen as such?

Any gender politic that *requires* a particular relation to the body based exclusively either on coherence or incoherence must grapple with these questions because such requirements can easily be read as a violation of those whose desires lie elsewhere. Even if one were able to measure conformity to or transgression from normative forms of embodiment (and here I agree with Martin that norms are never totally or successfully embodied), one needs to contend with Sullivan's critique of the idea that the desire to transgress normative forms is always good and the desire to embody them is always bad. We therefore return with Sullivan to the crucial matter of acknowledging the desire for possible lives raised by Butler (2004: 31), a matter that is recently clarified by Wiegman's (2006) claim that the desire for gender is at work in all body politics.

Desiring Possible Lives

Halberstam and Noble have good reason to be cynical about the possibility of transforming social structures that entrench the privilege of some precisely by repudiating others as less than human. Yet locating the disruptive potential of what is strange, unintelligible, incoherent, or unstable in those who are placed or who claim a place outside the boundaries of the human leaves those boundaries intact. In what *appears* to be a radical position, Halberstam and Noble seek to disrupt hegemonic meanings and practices only through locating that disruptive potential safely outside, in those others who have been, and probably will continue to be, repudiated by those who continue to project the threat of instability elsewhere. Although it may be useful for validating gender variance among those who are comfortable embracing an outlaw status, this strategy does little to disrupt normative perceptions about gender, sexuality, and embodiment as coherent, stable, and monolithic. It is a strategy that depends upon an opposition between the human and its others, between the fixed and the variant, the intelligible and the unintelligible. Problematic in this strategy is its reification of normative configurations of gender which reduces one's options to embodying them or refusing them, rather than understanding those normative configurations as fictions of intelligibility to which complex and varied relationships exist. In claiming a more radical potential for those deemed unintelligible than for those deemed intelligible, this strategy does achieve a reversal of the hierarchy to effect a welcome valorization of some delegitimized trans groups. But in so doing, it bestows a clarity, fixity, and coherence on normative forms of embodiment that Butler, Martin, Scheman, and Shildrick

argue is another bit of fiction. By the same token, it locates complexity only in abjected others, thus rendering irrelevant Halberstam's earlier call to "examine the strangeness of all gendered bodies" (1994: 226). As I have demonstrated with respect to Noble's work, this is a strategy that relies on maintaining rather than undoing the oppositions.

I have been suggesting, beyond the celebration of trans incoherence that remains a project for only some transpersons, that we consider the alternative project of acknowledging multiple forms of transgender *as* human, and the human as lacking the coherence and intelligibility it pretends to possess. As Butler and others have shown, such coherence and intelligibility has to be produced through the reiteration of norms and through abjecting the incoherent and the unintelligible. Acknowledging gender diversity as a human reality, not just a trans reality, strikes me as a worthy goal that does not require a monolithic concept of trans, as Halberstam fears, any more than it requires fixed or stable trans identities (although these may well be desired by some). In order to avoid privileging identities presumed to be less coherent as superior, such a project must avoid reducing the desire of some transsexuals to live as "ordinary" women or men to an externally imposed demand for coherence. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Butler's position is sometimes quite critical of those transsexuals who seek more stable identities through the use of surgery, although I have suggested that such a position contradicts her broader goal of embracing the diverse forms that transgender takes. Cressida Heyes (2007: 119–20) holds a similar view of transgender persons as ethical resisters of normativity, whereas transsexuals are read as more compliant with a system of gender dualism. Heyes does acknowledge that "not all persons benefit equally, if at all, from making themselves over into unconventionally gendered selves, and resistance to normalization has more resonance, for example, for feminists and transgendered radicals than for men (or women) happy in their skins and their roles" (119). One potential problem with this reading as applied to transitioning transsexuals is its association of being happy in one's skin with buying into normalizing gender roles. Her reading of the transsexual trajectory through this feminist lens risks occluding questions of desire and sexed embodiment that arguably complicate the discourses of normalization and resistance.

In my view, transsexual desires to change sex can be more productively read as internally motivated by the wish to embody the sex with which they both consciously and unconsciously identify. We need to find ways to make this desire for a possible life possible without diminishing the less conventional expressions of queer and/or transgender persons and without being forced to choose between them. Robyn Wiegman's (2006) analysis of the desire for gender at work in all body politics may prove useful here. Taking divergent desires for gender into account, as Wiegman suggests, provides the means to rethink embodiment itself as a state of human being that includes both

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intelligibility and unintelligibility. For Wiegman, and for me, recognizing the desire at work in multiple forms of what Sullivan calls "(un)becoming other" complicates the issue of whether one could ever settle on intelligibility or its other side. This is not simply because some desire intelligibility while others desire incoherence. Rather, it is because the "political and psychic work" (Wiegman 2006: 97) involved in any configuration of gender necessarily *includes* whatever gets abjected as its other.

With Kristeva and Butler, we need to examine carefully the processes on which claims to intelligibility and unintelligibility are based. Shildrick, Sullivan, and Wiegman encourage us to envision an ethics of embodiment that emerges from recognizing our mutual and diverse investments in becoming who we think we are, and in (un)becoming others. Developing such an ethics requires two capacities that necessitate the detour taken through chapters 4 and 5. First, it requires the capacity to encounter investments that are neither the same as one's own, nor so radically other as to render them unrecognizable. And second, it requires finding ways to theorize psychic complexity that does justice to the multiplicity of gender diversity, identity, and desire.



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Chapter 4

Risking the Unfamiliar: Psychic Complexity in Theories of Transsexual Embodiment

The recent proliferation of texts by transgender persons represents an important contribution to our collective understanding of what it means to be human. While Pat Califia (1997: 81) and Susan Stryker (2006a) also hold this position, they are also well aware—as my discussion of the previous rifts has demonstrated—that what trans studies contributes to our understanding of the human is complicated by the competing political perspectives and personal investments that constitute the field. If we accept that human beings are in part unintelligible, then there is an unknown part to acknowledge and questions to pose about whatever presents itself as our experience. Assigning unintelligibility exclusively to trans subjects, even when intended to demarcate a radical identity for some of them, arguably engages a form of abjection that reserves intelligibility for non-trans subjects. In this chapter I will explore two alternative accounts of transsexual identity that address both its intelligible and unintelligible aspects.

At a time when discussions of unconscious dynamics are rarely broached outside of psychoanalytic settings, Aaron Devor (1997) and Jay Prosser (1998) risk, at least to some extent, addressing the psychic complexity they encounter in transsexual identities. Devor's focus on the *similarities* between transsexual and non-trans subjects and Prosser's focus on their *differences* produce divergent discourses, despite a shared tendency to attribute the etiology of transsexual identity to some biological cause. Both authors avoid the stigmatization of transsexuals found in other attempts to take account of psychic dynamics, and together they provide a wealth of ethnographic and theoretical material through which those psychic dynamics can be explored. Valuable here is Devor's unearthing of what Susan Stryker calls "desubjugated knowledge" (2006a: 12–3), knowledge his trans participants produce about their own experiences. Equally valuable is Prosser's theorization of aspects of that knowing that remains subjugated, aspects that others (including Devor) leave unspoken. I argue in the first section that Devor's discourse of sameness, while it is useful in comparing the gender dysphoria of transmen with the widespread unease non-trans women experience with our bodies, ultimately does not provide

adequate tools for analyzing the psychic complexities revealed by his research participants. That is, his emphasis on similarities is limited to the extent that it obscures differences that others claim are specific to trans subjectivity.¹ In the second section, I argue that Prosser's discourse of difference is better suited to elucidating the complexity of trans embodiment, in part because it addresses psychic as well as social and biological dimensions. Focusing on the different discourses that emerge from desubjugated knowledge, I explore the question of how the psychic dynamics of transsexual identity have been engaged by Devor and Prosser. The concept of sexed embodiment as developed by psychoanalytic theory is introduced in the final section to enable an exploration of the possibilities and constraints operating on transsexual identities in particular, and on all identities in general.

With Judith Butler (1997), among other feminist theorists, I am committed to the belief that psychoanalysis has an important role to play in our understanding of embodied identities, including trans identities. According to Deborah Britzman (1998), psychoanalysis, along with queer theory, disrupts "narratives that promise the normalcy of life, that presume a life without difference, without a divided self" (80). Britzman raises two questions that are relevant for the rift I discuss here: can we entertain psychic life without pathologizing? And, if we accept that human subjects are in part unintelligible, how do we respond to the unknown parts both in ourselves and in others? It strikes me as crucial to ask both these questions today when discussions of unconscious dynamics are assumed by many to diminish the person under discussion and because it is widely believed that human beings are largely transparent, especially to themselves. These assumptions are part of what Jonathan Lear (1998) calls "the war ... over our culture's image of the human soul." He asks, "Are we to see humans as having depth—as complex psychological organisms who generate layers of meaning which lie beneath the surface of their own understanding? Or are we to take ourselves as transparent to ourselves?" (27). If we do not accept this transparency, if human identity includes unconscious fantasies at work in our becoming and (un)becoming, the challenge is how to think about the role of psychic life in our understanding of subjectivity. I will return to the psychoanalytic theory of sexed embodiment after examining the discourses of sameness and difference developed by Devor and Prosser respectively.

1 I refer to differences with non-trans subjects as articulated by participants in Devor's study and by Prosser. I do not imply that these are uniformly experienced or unaffected by a myriad of other differences such as class, race, sexuality, or ability.

Devor and the Discourse of Sameness

Written prior to his transition, Devor's extensive sociological study of Ftms contributes to the unearthing of subjugated knowledge around bio-psychosocial processes of identity and embodiment. Based on a valuable set of data, Devor's study addresses important concerns in the lives and thoughts of 45 transmen through a set of interviews conducted between 1987 and 1991. However, his broader theoretical interest in how *anyone* forms a sense of gender identity in contemporary Western society makes it difficult to ask questions about the specificity of transsexual identity. In her review of Devor's book, Karen Dubinsky suggests that, despite devoting some 600 pages to the study of transmen, "the significance and meaning of this research remains unclear, and too many of the hard questions have not been asked" (1999: 175). Her critique serves to remind ethnographic researchers that even extensive evidence of the complex matter of identity is not self-explanatory. For Dubinsky, some of the hard questions are:

Do people have to be "something" even if we expand the number of "things" it's possible to be? If we learn to count past two, will there still be people who grow up feeling as though they are on the "wrong" team? Do men and women possess radically different emotional ranges? Why are periods and breasts a status symbol for some girls, mildly distressing to others, and make some suicidal?

Clearly, members of trans communities do not agree on answers to these questions, and the final question about women's diverse relationships to our bodies now appears somewhat naive. But these questions point beyond Devor's major concern with how transmen come to identify themselves as men to questions of specificity and difference, which he tends to elide. Like many trans authors, Devor believes that posing the question of why a person seeks to transition is to pathologize them or to seek a "cure." But what if exploring this question, as some of Devor's participants do, enables them to pose a more complex set of questions concerning human potential, questions to which there are no simple answers?

Without diminishing the overall value of this study, or the courage, expertise, and care with which it was written, my interest here is to examine what can and cannot be theorized when it comes to the difficult matter of psychic dynamics. Specifically, I am interested in how the overall search for similarities animating this discourse tends to minimize differences between transsexual and non-transsexual experiences. First, in focusing on processes of identity formation in general, Devor locates the conflict on the outside, in the social organization of gender, making it impossible to think about different *kinds* of conflict, including psychic conflict. Although the strategy of making the foreign familiar may be a politically comfortable one for non-

trans feminists to adopt (and which may or may not have influenced Devor's approach), it is a strategy that avoids posing some of the more challenging questions about differences. It also prevents a more detailed analysis of the specificity of transsexual experience such as the one that Prosser explores. As a result, Devor's focus on similarities and on describing rather than analyzing Ftm experience makes it difficult for him to explore the psychologically rich material provided by his own research participants.

A second way that differences are minimized is by locating diversity in nature rather than in the diversity of psychic life. I will demonstrate how this second theoretical focus of Devor's discourse precludes taking account of the complex, unconscious positions that any subject arguably adopts with respect to sexed embodiment. This issue will be revisited with respect to Prosser, and with reference to the psychoanalytic theory I find useful in thinking about psychic complexity.²

The Truly Unfamiliar Can't Be Spoken

For some time now, non-trans feminists have criticized the hegemonic gender order for its restrictive beliefs, norms, and practices that have made gender one of the sources of social inequality. Transsexual experience and theory certainly contribute to our knowledge about "how society organizes and perpetuates gender" (Devor 1997: 37), particularly with respect to the regulation of sex/gender congruity that many transsexuals both contest and to some extent affirm. Contesting the ways in which socially accepted ideas about sex and gender congruity limit the possibilities for human expression is a critical practice that some transsexuals share with non-trans feminist and queer theorists. Acknowledging these important similarities, however, does not necessitate concluding with Devor "that most of the issues confronted by transsexual persons are neither theoretically nor practically distinct from those of other members of society and that gender and sex dysphorias and gender fluidity are a part of all of our lives" (xxvii). Emphasizing those issues that are at least superficially common to everyone risks creating a false sense of unity, omitting some striking differences, and underestimating the degree of conflict many transsexuals claim to experience.

A false sense of unity is the effect of presuming a homogeneous response to the gender order on the part of non-trans feminists and transsexuals. Today, non-trans feminists from what Ann Snitow (1990) described as the "minimalist" side of the feminist divide have challenged most of the "culturally accepted ideas" that Devor deems "preconditions" for transsexuality: that sexes

2 In my view, it is the *failure* to value psychic complexity in self and others that leads to the denigration of differently embodied subjects.

and genders are “essentially different, nonoverlapping, and normally neither negotiable nor transferable” (39). This critique has a tendency to read the desire for sex reassignment as demystifying claims to a natural sex–gender congruity, and is not necessarily shared by transsexuals, many of whom believe in essential differences and in the importance of sex–gender congruity. But to claim with Devor that “we live in a patriarchal world which requires us to see genders and sexes as dichotomized and normally permanent” (66) is to risk buying into a social determinism that eclipses the history of feminist and queer critiques of gender and obscures the diversity that exists. I do not contest the duality of sex categories that organize human subjectivity (even when they are erroneously assigned). Nor do I believe transsexuals ought to take on the political critique of gender formulated by non-trans feminists and by queer and transgender persons. I do want to suggest that the necessity Devor assigns to social norms poses problems for conceiving both our conscious and our unconscious potential to resist them.

A related problem with the discourse of sameness is its reliance on other questionable generalizations. Claiming that we all suffer from “gender and sex dysphorias”(xxvii) serves the useful purpose of forging commonalities, especially between non-trans feminists and transsexuals. But to argue that we simply suffer varying *degrees* of sex and gender dysphoria implies that there is nothing specific about transsexual experience that makes it qualitatively different from non-trans experience. Intended as an egalitarian gesture, this claim could also function to undermine the specificity of transsexual experiences of gender identity and embodiment, a specificity transsexuals like Prosser argue we need to appreciate. Devor notes that:

Perhaps, in the end, the biggest differences between transsexual people and other members of society lie not so much in the nature of the identity developmental and identity supporting processes through which they must pass, but in the anguish and consciousness with which they must negotiate them. (608)

This passage follows a lengthy description of our similarities: We’re all limited, we all suffer, we all strive to fit in to social norms, but some of us, for some reason, find this more painful than others. While these claims may be true at some very general level, and while it is important that Devor acknowledges transsexual pain, there is little appreciation here of a unique kind of conflict, a particular experience of embodiment, or a specific desire to transform a body often described as unbearable or “uninhabitable” (Prosser 1998: 204). Here we need to ask: To what extent do differences in degree become differences in kind? Is there a political cost of maintaining this focus on similarity through minimizing differences?

I agree with Devor that transsexuals, like other members of society, make sense of their lives within the context of the “dominant gender schemas” available (how could one do otherwise?). But I do not share his assumption “that participants had both as much free will and as many limited choices as do other persons who never entertain the possibility that they may be transsexual” (589). This claim may prove detrimental to understanding why a person adopts or resists a trans identity, especially if one pays attention to the narratives produced by Devor’s participants, among others. As I discuss below, Devor is not particularly interested in theorizing the different psychological constraints that might limit one’s choices and that would require posing more difficult questions. What choices did participants feel were and were not available to them? How can trauma, pain, and psychic conflict restrict one’s sense of possibility? Does suffering acute sex dysphoria mean one has less freedom to act than non-sufferers? Devor’s participants may have been grateful to him for insisting on their similarities with other members of society, especially as a corrective to those who would insist on pathologizing their differences. And perhaps a more nuanced analysis of difference simply did not seem possible or politically productive in the mid-1990s. But the interview material itself does not always support the discourse of sameness. Despite Devor’s considerable efforts to establish similarities with non-trans subjects, his participants speak of their differences, producing knowledge of their particularity. What might be gained by paying attention to these differences?

I agree with Devor that acute sex dysphoria is a conflict that can be responded to in various ways, but surely it marks those subjects who experience it in very particular ways. Discussions around the crises at puberty and encounters with a developing female body by Devor’s participants are at odds with his view that they confront the same issues as do other members of society. For example, however trying puberty may be for many non-transsexuals, I suspect few would describe their encounter with it as requiring “a new game plan to exist” (196), as Mel does. Likewise, the expression of disgust, loathing, and hatred for the body expressed by several of Devor’s participants makes it difficult to understand how the intensity of this response can be read as comparable to the sex and/or gender dysphoria even of lesbian and gay youth who are also likely to experience conflict at this time. Participants described the onset of menstrual periods and breast growth with words like “traumatizing,” “devastating,” and “tortuous.” At this time in their lives, Simon attempted suicide, Fred suffered a nervous breakdown, and Denis almost died of anorexia (his way to control his body) (192–4). Brian describes puberty as a time when “my body completely betrayed me and became even more filthy and degrading by growing breasts ... I hated my body and used to beat on myself with my fist. It did not belong to me. It was a prison and I wanted to be rid of it” (197). The problem with Devor’s description of this traumatic encounter as feeling “badly about having breasts”

(197) is not a lack of empathy on his part, but the discourse of sameness that inevitably minimizes these sorts of differences, rendering the unfamiliar familiar.

Without a control group of non-transsexuals, one can only speculate about the differences I am assuming exist here and that Dubinsky alludes to with her difficult questions. Devor notes that for Ftm transsexuals, the crisis of puberty is not only having to give up “tomboyish ways” (a disappointing experience shared by many non-trans women), but also having “insurmountable proof that they were not boys and would not grow up to be men” (193). This additional traumatic realization, plus the depth of their pain suggests to me that these participants confront some soul-wrenching, life-threatening experiences that are different not only in degree but also in kind and that are distinct from those of non-trans members of society.³ These issues become more apparent when we pay attention to what participants have to say about their own psychological conflicts. Even though Devor understands dysphoria to be overdetermined by social and historical context, by biological predisposition, and by “psychological factors,” he lacks the tools with which to analyze those psychological factors. As a result, psychic life becomes the theoretical unspoken in his text.

Both in North American culture and in Devor’s text there are two stumbling blocks to exploring psychological factors: On the one hand, any discussion of psychic life risks the stigma of mental illness, and on the other, taking psychic life seriously would mean the experience of dysphoria would have to be theorized, at least in part, in terms of unconscious conflict, mourning, and loss. Here Devor appears ambivalent, perhaps because in our current cultural climate, mental illness, psychic conflict, perhaps even unconscious motivations can be attributed only to those truly oppressive others we have permission to reproach: foreign dictators, serial killers, terrorists, maybe even the mothers of Ftms!⁴ But in distancing ourselves from these “others” we are left with no means to analyze the richness, diversity, or idiosyncrasy of our own psychic lives. If we cannot address psychic conflict, having made it foreign, taboo, unspeakable, then we create a distorted image of ourselves as reasonable, fully conscious decision-makers for whom conflict is an unexpected intruder. In the context of transsexuality, this may be a strategic maneuver to emphasize the capacity for agency. Nonetheless, it is a maneuver that makes it impossible to talk about

3 Trauma means wound, and none of us escape its impact. Psychoanalytic discourse provides a means to address “what people suffer from and for” (Phillips 1995: xvi), which is one way to acknowledge differences beyond the normalizing or pathologizing tactics of dominant medical and social practices.

4 Eight of Devor’s participants claim their mothers suffer “from pronounced psychological problems” (227), and Devor notes that one mother “suffered from a severe mental illness for which she received drugs” (95).

psychical agency, unconscious desire, processes of denial or repression, and meanings of sex or gender that might be idiosyncratic, or feelings of dread, self-loathing, or compulsion.

However difficult it may be for Devor to address these issues, his participants do not share this reticence. Even though they were not specifically asked to do so, they disclose intimate details about abuse, trauma, loss, and the usefulness of psychotherapy in clarifying their experience. Although Devor reports that “most” participants thought “psychological factors were of secondary importance” (561), his readers can hardly ignore the emphasis at least six of the 45 participants placed on those factors. For example, Darren states his belief that “social and psychological experiences could bring on a transsexual life, even without a biological basis” (556), and Bruce claims that “seventy-five percent of it, or close to that, is an emotional, psychological mending of something broken” (560). While Bruce is skeptical about therapy’s ability to help him “recover the loss experienced as a child over the loss of my body,” he nevertheless acknowledges it: “I’m grieving at the loss of [the woman I was]. I miss her. Sometimes I wish she were never gone” (561). Walter says, “I guess it just must be that inner thing, that core identity, that psychic thing inside you that makes you know that you’re male or female” (558). Some participants make explicit reference to possible traumatic experiences without claiming to have any definitive knowledge about them, and one person advocates forgetting as a strategy to deal with the pain. Pat says,

I don’t know whether there was a little girl that, like, fairly early on, through some abuse, like, disappeared ... I am also aware that I have issues that are unresolved about intimacy and about early childhood trauma (the content of which remains unclear) and I wonder to what extent there is an interaction effect between my gender issues and these childhood traumas. (557)

Bill asks a series of questions concerning his own unconscious processes, the answers to which are attributed to a higher power:

Did I identify with my persecutor, my father? Did I perceive women as weak and ineffective victims of male aggression and domination and identify with my father in order to survive? ... Did I see myself as my mother’s rescuer and need to be male to fill that role? ... I will never know unless God indeed provides answers some day. (557)

Generalizing about his transsexual acquaintances, Bruce adds: “I’d say at age five, something traumatic happens” (561). Finally, Brian movingly states:

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A child can learn social values by being terrorized by them. That kind of trauma sticks for life, however actively and consciously one may strive to neutralize the pain of it...One's very core of being has been shattered and scarred in a way that can never be healed to the extent it could be forgotten. (560)

Even though Brian concludes that “some emotional scars are too deep to be overcome by pragmatic logic or psychoanalytic games” (560), it is clear that a number of these participants have given considerable thought to the role played by unconscious conflict. Moreover, Devor notes that the participants stress in their advice to others “the paramount importance of psychotherapy in clarifying the root issues for would-be transsexuals” (571). Despite the fact that many participants considered “whatever psychological damage might have been done ... [to be] both permanent and irreversible” (561), a significant number of them identified psychological factors as key to understanding their experience. Insight into psychic life does not legitimize a refusal of transsexuality, as Devor seems to fear. Nor does it minimize the role played by childhood abuse that Devor finds significant.⁵ But in Devor's theory, as elsewhere in our culture, psychic life is difficult to address except in the most superficial way. Devor does allude to those psychic dynamics discussed at length by his participants when he acknowledges that “the meanings which persons attach to their experiences are more central to the question ... [of what leads to transsexuality] than are the existence of such experiences in persons' lives per se” (590). But the emphasis placed on those meanings here is soon eclipsed by the simultaneous, if unconvincing emphasis on natural diversity.

Natural Complexity as Saving Grace

If the discourse of sameness produces the desired effect of normalizing gender dysphoria through focusing on the similarities between experiences of transmen and non-trans women, something else must be added to the

5 Without relinquishing his view that sex and gender dysphorias are due to a “blending of causes,” Devor does concede in the face of an abundance of evidence that “in most cases family dynamics play a large part in the establishment of gender and sex dysphorias” (67). The evidence of abusive family patterns comes both from other studies of transsexuals and from Devor's participants, 60.5 percent of whom report abuse by mothers or fathers (94). However tempted Devor (along with the rest of us) may be to blame abusive parents for *causing* gender dysphoric daughters, he is clear that abuse, in and of itself, cannot be considered either necessary or sufficient (590). To say that abusive dynamics “can create gender and sex dysphorias” (67), does not mean they necessarily do, nor does Devor claim that child abuse is always part of the social context.

social analysis of identity formation to account for their differences. And given that Devor regards transsexuality as a conscious choice that is made in particular circumstances where alternative choices are also possible, something has to account for those choices, and also for the meanings persons attach to their experience. I have suggested that more weight could be given to the unconscious meanings articulated by a number of Devor's participants, but he ultimately returns to biological claims, despite having demonstrated the untenable basis of those claims (59–65). Departing from mainstream notions of biological determinism, where nature is used to reinforce or legitimize what Devor would consider distorted, patriarchal conceptions of sex and gender, he argues instead that “genders and sexes naturally occur in far more than the two types which patriarchal gender schemas prescribe” (67). Far from being an “error of nature,” as some transsexuals believe, Devor speculates that “transsexualism exists because the natural world thrives on diversity” (67). It is we who construct narrow and limited constructs of sex and gender, and it is we who force ourselves to live with these “because it is simpler for our limited intellects” to do that than to acknowledge the complexity of nature (67). This view raises some questions that ultimately concern our conceptions of agency and constraint as they bear on our relationship to gender and to our bodies.

First, in suggesting that complex human behavior reflects a naturally given diversity, is Devor not in danger of reducing our ability to choose our identities, and/or to change them over time? Second, in describing sex as diverse and complex, and gender as “naturally occurring,” what happens to the reading Devor elsewhere embraces of sex and gender as socially mediated concepts that we make sense of according to our personal psychologies? Is this theory of a naturally occurring complexity a way to avoid addressing the complexity of psychic dynamics? What is gained by imagining that the production of diverse human identities is determined by some unknown natural complexity?⁶

Devor perceives transsexuality to be the result of limited social definitions of sex and gender that conflict with a naturally occurring complexity that we stifle due to our limited intellectual capacities. In this view, freedom becomes freedom from existing gender and sex categories (with their oppressive norms), and freedom to express whatever “diversity” nature has endowed us with. Transsexuals represent a particular compromise formed by this conflict between culture and nature, and by humankind's limited intellectual endowment. And while Devor does not blame transsexuals for being insufficiently revolutionary, as some non-trans feminists do, he does paint a surprisingly similar picture of what liberation from this conflict would entail: not becoming the other sex, but

6 Anne Fausto-Sterling (1999) argues convincingly that because biological processes are affected by ideas and experience, they cannot be construed as static or as determinant of human behavior. I revisit this issue in Chapter 5.

disrupting sex and gender categories by visibly occupying some intermediate term. Devor speculates that “many [transsexuals] would be happier with a more intermediate gender or sex status than any that are now available to them—could such be negotiated” (67).

Curiously, Devor’s theoretical speculation departs from what many transsexuals explicitly seek: the means to become the other sex. For transgender philosopher Michael Gilbert, freedom from rigid sex and gender distinctions means freedom to move from one to the other easily, not the questioning of stereotypical norms that would undermine gender categories. In “This man is all woman,” his review of Deirdre McCloskey’s story of transition, Gilbert (2000a) writes that “women’s concern for one another, their demonstrations of affection and thoughtfulness . . . showed her clearly the differences between the masculinity she was fleeing and the femininity she knew was right for her.” As this passage reveals, possessing the freedom to become the other sex is not synonymous with the freedom to challenge longstanding stereotypes. Devor’s celebration of natural diversity conflicts with equally longstanding criticisms of the natural, of gender stereotypes, and, as I have shown with respect to Devor’s participants, it conflicts with what some transsexuals claim to be the social and psychological bases of their experience.⁷

As a personally experienced necessity, and a normative social requirement, the desire to create sex–gender congruity cannot simply be “mandated” out of existence, as Janice Raymond (1979: 178) naively hopes. Moreover, the celebration of transsexuality as the manifestation of “natural diversity” prevents us from grasping the suffering involved in what may be a traumatic response to ascribed sex. Brian, for example, describes the transman as one who “finds a way to escape the trauma and degradation of having a female body” (566), a body that has been rendered abject. Prosser also describes a process of (dis)embodiment where the body is experienced as foreign or abject, and where the subject is certainly not “free” to inhabit it. Nor is s/he free to choose from whatever range of gender expression a given society makes available. I agree with Devor that there is a logic to transsexuality, and a need to resolve what is perceived to be an intolerable conflict. As a solution to acute sex dysphoria, transitioning appears to be a “perfect fit in an imperfect world” (589), an understandable choice given the prevailing sex/gender norms. But if changing sex is one “solution” to sex dysphoria, it is not a simple one. Attributing the desire to change sex or even the various manifestations of that desire to “natural diversity” precludes a more complex understanding of the specificity of those desires.

My interest in posing the question of psychic complexity is not to stigmatize a particular group of transsexuals, but to better understand what is at stake in their experience. Many of Devor’s participants recognize the importance of

7 For a recent reclamation of natural diversity, see Riki Lane (2009).

ensuring that transsexuality is chosen only after other options have been explored. Walter, for example, stressed the importance of distinguishing needs from wants because “sometimes what you want is not what you should have” (574). However, when Devor claims, paradoxically, that “the causes of transsexualism in individual person’s lives are beside the point” (585), he makes these kinds of distinctions impossible. Thus the difficult questions some transsexuals, including Prosser, wish to pursue are prejudged as necessarily harmful to transsexuals and therefore as beyond the pale of respectful theoretical inquiry.

As Audre Lorde (1984) pointed out with regard to race, it is not differences that are a problem, but our failure to acknowledge them. I have argued that Devor’s discourse of sameness minimizes differences between trans and non-trans experiences through his focus on the need to conform to social norms and by relocating difference in some natural diversity. I suggest that other theoretical tools are needed if we are to understand the specificity of transsexual experiences, including those of trauma, loss, and conflict. If respect for others necessitates recognizing their different experiences as well as those aspects that are shared, then theorizing these differences is a way to appreciate what are surely psychically profound experiences.

Prosser and the Discourse of Difference

While there are obvious grounds for solidarity between transsexuals and other groups who contest the normative gender order, I am suggesting that the differences between them must be broached if we are to recognize and appreciate the specificity of at least a certain form of transsexuality.⁸ Prosser believes that transsexuals, unlike some transgendered persons, do not find ways “to manage the split, to balance in a refigurative desire the difference between material body and body image” (179) and instead pursue embodiment through surgical transformation. The claim that transsexuals have a different experience of embodiment than non-transsexuals thus becomes the point of departure for a critical engagement with contemporary theorizing from queer, transgender, and poststructuralist feminist perspectives. How does one come to inhabit a sex, and what cultural, psychological, or physical considerations should be taken into account?

As discussed in previous chapters, the problem of how to theorize embodiment becomes highly politicized in discourses around transsexuality where it is alternatively read as a refusal of gender norms (particularly when it takes a transgender or queer form), or as a compliance with gender norms

8 This major contention of Prosser is echoed by others in an anthology of prominent transsexual authors (More and Whittle 1999).

(particularly when it does not take those forms). Psychological considerations have been dismissed in transgender communities as both pathologizing and depoliticizing, which they certainly can be (Dean 2000: 64). But according to Tim Dean “depsychologizing transgenderism does not reveal it as a purely sociopolitical problem” (67), and for Prosser as well, theorizing the lived experience of transsexuals involves something else.⁹ In what follows, I show how Prosser’s critique of sociopolitical theories and his descriptions of psychical processes involved in transsexual embodiment are useful in elucidating some crucial differences that mark the specificity of many transsexual lives. I take issue with Prosser when he locates the origins of those differences in an unmediated concept of the body because it seems inconsistent with other emphases in his text and because it eclipses the unconscious dimension of transsexual subjectivity, a dimension belonging to all human subjects.

According to Prosser, there are many reasons why transsexual narratives are incompatible with queer theory and transgender theory as developed in a poststructuralist framework. First, those who read transsexual bodies purely as “effects or products of discourse” miss the specificity of transsexual experience (Prosser 1998: 12). To read transsexuality as either a “bad literalization” of gender or a “good deliteralization” of it is to embrace a sterile opposition in which one cannot grasp the lived experience (12–5).¹⁰ On one hand, queer and transgender theories can be read as undoing the conventional link between sex and gender. Privileged here are transgendered subjects who cross lines of gender to deconstruct their relationship to body and to sex. Citing the work of Butler, Prosser notes that queer theory champions the transsexual as revealing a shift “away from the embodiment of sexual difference” (through blurring boundaries, revealing that “sex” is immaterial or really gender all along). He argues, on the contrary, that transsexual transition shifts the subject “more fully into it” (6). On the other hand, sociopolitical theorists who denigrate transsexuals as “dupes” of medical constructions of gender stereotypes (Raymond 1979, Billings and Urban 1982, Hausman 1995) read transsexuality as a bad literalization of gender. As Henry Rubin (1998a: 273) points out, this accusation of bad gender politics is also implied by those queer theorists and

9 Unfortunately, the popular association of psychoanalysis with unwarranted claims or victim blaming, attributable in part to its highly prejudicial theory and treatment of homosexuality from the 1930s to the 1970s (Lewes 1995), and in part to similar treatments of transsexuals, has made it difficult for many trans theorists to talk about trauma, fantasy, loss, or desire. I read Prosser’s book as an important exception to this trend.

10 Prosser directs his critique at numerous cultural theorists (see 1998: 238n19 and n20 for the respective lists), although transsexual theorists and autobiographers are certainly not immune from embracing one or the other of these views.

non-trans feminists who take issue with transsexuals wishing to live as women or men. Either one is a politically motivated gender outlaw (Bornstein 1994) or one is complicit with a conventional gender order.¹¹

For Prosser, these theories of sociopolitical motivation occlude another crucial factor in transsexual transition that he describes as “an initial absence of and subsequent striving for” the feeling of embodiment (7) and as “the transformation of an unlivable shattered body into a livable whole” (92). Clearly, if one can refuse to embrace what one’s culture deems the appropriate masculine or feminine behavior, then gender does not determine how one inhabits sex. With transsexual subjects it becomes especially clear that it is not just that “the [gender] norm fails to determine us completely,” as Butler asserts (1993: 127), but that gender norms completely fail to determine us. For many transsexuals, the rejection of ascribed sex is not necessarily or even primarily a refusal of gender norms, but an inability to inhabit with any degree of comfort the sex to which those norms supposedly apply. The failure of gender norms does not make gender irrelevant or dispensable for transsexuals, as some transgender theorists would have it. Rather, gender remains a crucial category for transsexuals since it provides a rationale for securing an alternative embodiment. Contrary to queer theory, then, Prosser argues that sex and gender are separate categories which must not be collapsed if the specificity of transsexual experience is to be understood (59).

If the transsexual project is “to materialize [sexual] difference in the body” (13), then there is a clear commitment to stable categories of sex, even though who gets to occupy those categories and the construction of those categories are contested. For Prosser, “the positions of man and woman are indeed not free of fabrication, are never given facts. But, for some, acknowledgment of this fictional investment makes desire for their locations no less powerful” (205). Less fictional are the bodily sensations that Prosser believes tie the transsexual experience of the body to the literal, albeit in ways that are problematic and that conflict with his emphasis on psychical factors.

Unlike Devor’s discourse of sameness, Prosser’s discourse of difference theorizes transsexuality as a particular experience of embodiment that is firmly rooted in the psychical history of trans subjects. For him it is a process that involves “entering into a lengthy, formalized, and normally substantive transition: a correlated set of corporeal, psychic, and social changes” (4). It is a process of responding, after a considerable amount of careful reflection, to a particular way of being that one has decided is untenable.¹² Neither a disease,

11 The problems with this hierarchy are discussed in Chapter 2.

12 Claudine Griggs (1998: 33) reproduces a list of ten groups of people who may request reassignment but who are not transsexual (and for whom surgical treatment would be dangerous). Many transsexuals support, at least in theory, the need for clinical

nor a reflection of natural diversity, transsexuality is a transition one undergoes to alter a deeply felt conflict between body and image of self.

As I will discuss shortly, the Lacanian versions of psychoanalysis I find persuasive concur with Prosser's insistence on the acquisition of sexed embodiment as crucial to human well-being. Prosser refers to Didier Anzieu's concept of the "skin ego," an elaboration of Freud's "body ego," to argue that "subjectivity is not just about having a physical skin; it's about feeling one owns it: it's a matter of psychic investment of self in skin" (73). In other words, the ability to feel at home in one's skin is necessary for the well-being of the subject (79). According to Anzieu,

one is not a person if one does not believe in the identity and continuity of the self ... The human being who holds these beliefs has certainly to question them. But the person who does not have them has to acquire them before he can experience his own being and his own well-being. (cited in Prosser 1998: 80)

Prosser's point is that transsexuals can neither adopt nor reject beliefs in continuity until they can "own" their own bodies.

Never reduced to an effect of medical discourse alone, the transsexual experience of "wrong" embodiment is explained by contrasting the body image that founds the ego (or me) to the visible, material body. Body image is understood to be the projected surface of the body *as it is felt to be* through the experience of bodily sensations.¹³ Emphasizing projected internal sensations, Prosser derives body image from physical experience:

The body's physical surface or encasing provides the anacletic support for the psychic apparatus: the ego, the sense of self, derives from the experience of the material skin. The body is not only not commensurable with its "mental" projection but responsible for producing this projection. The body is crucially and materially formative of the self. (1998: 65)

Envisioning body image as the product of bodily sensations alone conflicts with the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist view that includes processes of

care, including psychological counseling. But the gender identity clinics are criticized for applying normative ideas about gender and class in discriminatory ways, as well as for combining health care with research. I thank Trish Salah for clarifying this critique (personal communication).

13 Prosser draws on Freud's claim that the ego is a "mental projection of the surface of the body, besides ... representing the superficies of the mental apparatus" (Freud 1961: 26n1). Tim Dean claims this passage is often used, problematically, to reduce subjectivity to the ego (Dean 2000: 165n55).

identification and signification as well. For example, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) notes that “the body image cannot be simply and unequivocally identified with the sensations provided by a purely anatomical body. The body image is as much a function of the subject’s psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy” (79). And Gayle Salamon (2004: 117) adds that “the usefulness of the body image for theorizing gendered embodiment is precisely not that the body image is material, but that it allows for a resignification of materiality itself.” The important point for Prosser, however, is that the body image in which one invests need not be synonymous with the material body or organism. Moreover, he argues that “body image can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her body to conform to it. The image of wrong embodiment describes most effectively the experience of pretransition (dis)embodiment: the feeling of a sexed body dysphoria profoundly and subjectively experienced” (69). In *this* formulation, it is the *body image* that “has a material force,” not the physical body itself (69). He therefore concludes that if “the skin is the locale for the physical experience of body image and the surface upon which is projected the psychic representation of the body” (72), then one can only feel “at home in one’s skin” if material body and body image correspond (73). This second formulation is better suited to Salamon’s (2004: 118, 112) arguments that Prosser needs to attend to the phantasmatic dimensions of that psychic representation, and that body image “relies for its coherence on a vast storehouse of past impressions, sensations, fantasies, and memories.”¹⁴

For Prosser, the “integrity of the alternatively gendered imaginary” (1998: 77) is paramount, and must be inscribed in the flesh. That is to say that one’s image of oneself as male or female takes precedence over the material body which is felt to be the undesirable other sex. Prosser explains that for many pre-transition transsexuals the genitals remain “unsexed” and “nonerogenous” because they are “materially sexed” and experienced as wrong. It is the conscious body ego that refuses to own or to recognize as its own the “referential body”:

I do not recognize as proper, as my property, this material surround; therefore I must be trapped in the wrong body. Since inappropriateness is located in the material body, the entire configuration explains why the subject seeks surgical intervention to alter the flesh rather than psychological intervention to transform body image. If the body is not owned, it is in this experience of body—not *my* body—that surgery intervenes. (78–9)

14 Salamon’s criticisms of Prosser’s somewhat flawed theoretical apparatus are well taken. I am more interested in his delineation of the psychic apparatus, even when, or precisely insofar as the phantasmatic is confounded with material reality.

As this passage demonstrates, Prosser derives the constitution of body image from bodily sensations or feelings of the body that do not involve any conflict or trauma. But trauma *is* located in the experience of discrepancy between body image and visible body. Borrowing from the work of Oliver Sacks, Prosser describes two body image distortions that accompany transsexual experience: 1) body agnosia, or the forgetting of specific body parts; and 2) phantomization, or the ability to imagine body parts that have been “lost” and that should have been there: “In the case of the transsexual the body constructed through sex reassignment surgery is not one that actually existed in the past, one that is literally re-membered, but one that should have existed; sex reassignment surgery is a recovery of what was not” (84). Moreover, despite his claim that surgery is a need, not a desire or a demand (104–6), Prosser adds: “The body of transsexual becoming is born out of a yearning for a perfect past—that is, not memory but nostalgia: the desire for the purified version of what was, not for the return to home per se (*nostos*) but to the romanticized ideal of home” (84).

I am interested in Prosser’s efforts to demonstrate that for the human subject the signifier of one’s sex comes to be psychically invested in the flesh, and that the experience of disembodiment concerns a *difficulty* in this process.¹⁵ From this perspective, sociopolitical discourses that try to account for transsexuality, whether approvingly or disapprovingly, without taking this phenomenon into account, are especially vulnerable to his charge that transsexual experience is being reduced to a mere “discursive effect.” However, while Prosser challenges what he takes to be the reductionism of (some) cultural theory, his own reductionism remains problematic. Conflating “the feeling of one’s sex” with the flesh itself, he attributes the resistance to inscribing a sexually specific sex to the material flesh and not to the subject. With a problematic recourse to unmediated bodily sensations, Prosser argues that the key to transsexual narrative is to see “how the material flesh may resist its cultural inscription” (1998: 7). Many transsexuals do claim to experience their disembodiment as a state of alienation or exile and for them changing sex indicates the “ongoing centrality of sexual difference . . . a marker of the limits of its refigurability” (204). But one could also argue that

15 In relation to this, I am intrigued by Paul Verhaeghe’s (2001: 69) claim that the “real body” shows up in “exceptional cases” involving “depersonalization” and “desymbolization”:

In such a case, a part of the body becomes unrecognizable because the signifier has been withdrawn from it. As a consequence, the subject is confronted with the real of the flesh, with something anxiety provoking and uncanny. The very same process can be recognized in hysterical revulsion: if the body (my own or another’s) loses its erotic investment (Freud), or its signifier (Lacan), then the hysterical subject reacts with disgust to this emergence of the real of the flesh.

these limits and “the recalcitrance of bodily matter” (17) are due to a psychic (re)investment of sexed identity in the body rather than claiming that sexed identity originates in the body itself.

The problem remains that in hoping to avoid the poststructuralist reading of transsexuality as either bad essentialism or good transcendence, Prosser’s call to “risk essentialism” does not avoid reinstating the opposite where at least one form of essentialism is good and transcendence is bad.¹⁶ From this perspective, his theorization of transsexuality in terms of bodily needs, while avoiding what might be seen as the “bad” essentialism of a prediscursive, immutable body, nevertheless inevitably returns to biological foundationalism. I would argue, however, that a good deal more than essentialism is risked in emphasizing the affective importance of *feeling* one inhabits material flesh. Because such “feelings” must themselves be mediated by conscious processes of interpretation and by unconscious desire, it is reductionist to imagine them as simply produced by the body. What makes Prosser’s work so compelling is precisely his ability to describe these “feelings,” and to name the fantasies attached to them in articulating his own experience. If the transsexual experience is, at least initially, one of existing in a space Catherine Millot (1990) calls “horsexe” (or “outsidesex”) and that Prosser deems “uninhabitable,” then like other psychic experiences it is a complex body/mind state that engages both conscious and unconscious dynamics at work in the subject. I do not agree with either Millot or Salamon that for transsexuals this is a psychotic experience of being “outside of language, outside of meaning, outside of the symbolic, outside of relation, outside of desire” (Salamon 2004: 120), because of the insistence on sexual difference and on the desire to change sex. Contrary to Salamon’s (2004: 120) assertion that affirming materiality means insisting “on the livability of one’s own embodiment,” I suggest that for Prosser the point is to *alter* one’s body to enable it to be livable.¹⁷

Prosser’s reliance on psychoanalytic and phenomenological theories of bodily sensations to account for the specificity of transsexual experience avoids the potential moralism of sociopolitical accounts, and provides an alternative to the discourse of sameness Devor develops. But when he reduces experiences of the body to the body itself, he eclipses the subject of desire which is not commensurate with either the body or the body-image. In the following section, I argue that psychoanalysis has the potential to address aspects of transsexual

16 For an alternative interpretation of Prosser as successfully resisting essentialist discourse, see Boyne (1999: 222–3).

17 In theory, these dynamics can be analyzed and their meaning made available. But here one can only speculate. And Phillips (1995: 17) reminds us that in some cases the unconscious describes “both the limits of what we can know and the areas of our lives in which knowing, and the idea of expertise, may be inappropriate.”

experience Prosser vividly describes but does not adequately theorize, and I discuss the extent to which this potential has been realized.

Psychoanalysis and the Concept of Sexed Embodiment

For me, the value of psychoanalytic thought for thinking about transsexuality is its refusal of two disabling dichotomies: 1) between the biological and the social; and 2) between the normal and the pathological. The first dichotomy leads to attributing differences either to biological causes beyond our control (as Prosser and Devor sometimes do), or to oppressive social constructs that are imagined alternatively to be beyond our control or easily overthrown (Rothblatt 1995). The second dichotomy involves either confusing the uncommon with the nonhuman (transsexual as monstrous “other”), or ignoring important distinctions because one is eager to embrace otherness as sameness (as Devor sometimes does). A psychoanalytic perspective avoids the first dichotomy by enabling us to consider the unconscious dynamics of psychic life. The concept of sexed embodiment it theorizes involves a psychic investment in the body that is reducible neither to biology nor to the social. Contrary to popular opinion, the second dichotomy is anathema to many psychoanalytic theorists, especially to the Lacanian theorists whose work I find valuable. Even for Freud, what passes as “normal” is a kind of ideal type, and no human being is free of internal conflict, suffering, or constraints on thought and action of which we are largely unaware. In his book aptly titled *On Being Normal and Other Disorders*, Paul Verhaeghe (2004) confounds any clear-cut opposition between the normal and the pathological, following the Lacanian insistence on the fictional status of the former. And for Freud the goal of psychoanalysis is not “to make pathological reactions impossible, but to give the patient’s ego *freedom* to decide one way or the other” (1961: 50n1).

Without denying the history of pathologizing non-normative subjects in which some psychoanalysts have participated (and no doubt still do participate), my interest in this theory derives from its appreciation of the complexity of human subjectivity. It is a theory that promotes the view that we have various ways to come to terms with sexual difference, separation, and loss, none of which are immune to disruption (in times of crisis) along lines established in the history of a subject’s experience. By disrupting the us–versus–them paradigm, what Lacanian psychoanalysis offers is a general theory of subjectivity in which the particular experience of transsexuality would have to be located. Transsexual embodiment has something to teach us about what human embodiment is, about what forms it is capable of taking, and what difficulties it may encounter. From this perspective, an adequate theorization of any subjectivity, including that of transsexual subjectivity, would have to contend with the following propositions:

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1. that the acquisition of sexed embodiment is crucial to the being and well-being of all human subjects
2. that the social construction of gender (that is, the historical and cultural production of meanings attached to men and women) shapes but does not determine how one inhabits or fails to inhabit a sex
3. that the organism (the physiological, biological or hormonal aspects of a person) participates in, but does not determine how a subject negotiates the processes of embodiment
4. that acquiring a sexed body is a complex social and relational psychosexual process with unconscious dimensions that need to be analyzed in terms of their meaning and structure, not normalized, pathologized, or ignored.

What I am suggesting here is that taking these propositions into account enhances our understanding of how bodies are inhabited (or uninhabited), and what capacities we possess for transforming the meanings attached to those bodies. Together they effectively refuse the disabling dichotomies mentioned above, and they make room for acknowledging unintelligibility in oneself and in others. In what follows I explore their applicability to the specific experience of transsexual embodiment as described by Prosser, Devor, and others.

Kate Bornstein (1994: 51–2), who advocates embracing a fluid gender identity rather than ratifying the traditional gender binary, nevertheless describes the experience of being neither one sex nor the other as a kind of “madness” (1998: 251). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this “madness” may have less to do with a multiplicity of ego identifications operating at the imaginary level of sexual identity, and more to do with a difficulty at the symbolic level of sexual identity where the task is to establish oneself as a separate subject. Bruce Fink (1995) describes this other level as that of desire, as a level that concerns the subjective capacity for *jouissance* within a feminine or masculine structure (116–7). Sexual difference in the Lacanian, symbolic sense, refers neither to biological difference, nor to the gender one imagines oneself to be, but to a structure which results from the way a subject relates to the signifier of loss.¹⁸ For Lacanians, the problem with the state of being neither one sex nor the other is that the subject has not adequately separated from the Other. In this precarious state, one is lost as a separate, desiring subject, instead of relating to

18 I agree with Tim Dean (2000: Chs 1 and 2) that feminists are right to query the confusing terminology that refers (unnecessarily) to the phallus, but wrong to jettison the concept of sexual difference altogether. Salamon provides an alternative reading of transsexuality from a social constructionist position that dispenses with the concept of sexual difference. Her description (2006: 587) of accounts of gender dysphoric subjects is compelling, even if her own claims about them remain problematic.

loss and finding oneself as a separate, desiring subject. In such a psychic space it is not surprising that one's body should feel like an Other's, not one's own, or simply "wrong."

In partial agreement with Prosser, Shepherdson (2000) views sexed embodiment as something that is acquired, not simply given to us. But unlike Prosser, who derives body image from physical sensations, Shepherdson insists the body is marked by inscribing an image through a process of signification:

the body itself cannot take form without undergoing this subjection to representation. Born as an organism, the human animal nevertheless has to acquire a body, come into the possession of its body ... through the image and the signifier—the formative power of the Gestalt, and the radical dependence on the other, in the exchange of words. (99–100)

Indeed, in his essay on anorexia, Shepherdson (1998: 58) argues that the body is acquired or "given in a process that runs against the grain of nature, so counter to natural development that the problem of the constitution of the body may, in difficult circumstances, threaten the very life of the organism." This theory offers a way to grasp the complexities of constituting a body that goes beyond the relationship of body image to material body and so enables the inclusion of the relation to the Other, that is, to language, culture, education, norms and so on. It does not produce a negation of the body, as Prosser fears, but a theorization of it that emphasizes the unconscious, the effect of the Other on us.

To clarify, for Lacan (1977) the essence of the subject is to be a speaking being, and we are called into being by virtue of the "letters" that are inscribed on our bodies by the social and parental scripts that name us:

Speech is in fact a gift of language, and language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is. Words are trapped in all the corporeal images that captivate the subject; they may make the hysteric 'pregnant' ... [or] represent the flood of urine of urethral ambition, or the retained faeces of avaricious *jouissance*. (87)

If there is a material basis to language, then we have to read the effects of unconscious investments made in the body as a result of our inevitable encounter with the Other, including a particular relationship to our parental others. Far from reducing the body to "someone else's idea" or rendering it unknowable, as Prosser fears Lacanians do (13), this reading offers us a way to make sense of what we have become both subject of and subject to. In other words, if sexed embodiment is largely an unconscious process, it does concern the "discourse and desire of others around us insofar as the former are internalized" and operate as "foreign bodies" within us (Fink 1995: 11). Psychoanalysis offers us a specific kind of knowledge about what is written on

our bodies and about ourselves as libidinal beings (Soler 1995: 53). Prosser's fears thus appear to be based on a misconception of psychoanalysis or on a popular misreading of Lacan.

Writing from the perspective of relational theory, Adrienne Harris (1998) describes the formation of the body ego as a "contested surface in which inner and outer demands get inextricably tangled. The internally felt subjective experience of agency, for example, is an experience that emerges from being seen, wanted, touched, imagined" (44). With Lacan, Harris emphasizes the importance of language and the gaze of the Other in the constitution of the body. Here we can ask how the "forgetting of specific body parts" and the ability to imagine the recovery of other parts might concern the transsexual subject's relation to the demand of the Other. Is the yearning for a purified and romanticized ideal described by Prosser simply a need, or is it, as Harris suggests, a defensive creation of the body "as a way of forgetting, as an erasure or foreclosure of traumatic memory" (51)? What are the dynamics of "body agnosia"? Do they involve the repression of traumatic experiences? How is the "phantomization" of body parts that should have existed related to the psychodynamic concept of fantasy?¹⁹

Lacanian theorists like Shepherson would agree with Prosser (204) that "sexed dislocation is uninhabitable" and that acquiring a sexed body is necessary to becoming a separate, desiring subject. They argue that becoming an embodied subject (for anyone) involves finding a way to assume the *loss* of phantasized omnipotence, since such a phantasy positions one beyond or outside sex. From this perspective, Prosser's "romanticized ideal of home" may be a way to imagine oneself comfortably embodied instead of disembodied. Alternative phantasies of being beyond sexual difference (Noble 2006: 42) suggest an idealized position beyond the loss that founds one's desire as a subject.

Prosser accuses Lacan of reducing materiality to language and/or signifiers and of producing disembodied accounts of the subject. But careful readers cannot credit the view that Lacan's emphasis on language and on representation negates the body. Dean (2000) argues that because of its interest in the corporeal satisfaction of the drive and the symbolic nature of the symptom, psychoanalysis cannot be used to support either purely sociopolitical or biological theories of the subject's lived experience. Similarly, Shepherdson (1998) argues that "the body is neither a biological phenomenon nor a product of representation ... in fact, psychoanalysis may well represent a theoretical disruption of this all

19 A detailed examination of the psychic dynamics of transsexuality would have to be based on clinical material, and is beyond the scope of this discussion. For some interesting, controversial, and mostly theoretical Lacanian approaches to these questions, see Blake's (2000) review of Prosser, Dean (2000), Shepherdson (1994), Millot (1990), and Safouan (1980).

too familiar debate between natural and symbolic models” (48). In his critique of Butler that can be applied to Prosser as well, Dean (2000: 187) contests Butler’s accusation that Lacan focuses narrowly on linguistic “subjects of the signifier, not subjects of desire.” He argues instead that sexuality, including transsexuality, must be theorized in terms of desire and *jouissance* and that Lacanian theory offers the tools for doing so. Pertinent here is his point that the failure to distinguish “between the body (which needs) and the subject (which desires)” means that “subjectivity ... collapses back into the ego ... and desire is effectively reduced to need” (199). The theoretical dead end here is that “needs concern the biological organism and therefore have little to do with sexuality, which concerns the subject of desire” (Dean 2000: 199). Of course if the image and the signifiers of what becomes the sexed body are believed to originate in the “material flesh,” instead of coming from the encounter with an Other and with the question of sexual difference, then neither psychoanalytic nor poststructuralist accounts of embodiment will suffice.

As we can see, psychoanalysts and transsexuals both have a story to tell about the subject’s ability to (re)negotiate the process of sexed embodiment. For many transsexuals, including transmen Paul Hewitt (1995) and Mark Rees (1996), surgery is considered a necessary means for coming to inhabit a body, and is preferable to a precarious state of disembodiment. Hewitt writes: “I would not be taking this action if there were an alternative. I am not making a choice, I am simply taking the only course open to me” (69). The urgency with which this perceived necessity is felt explains why the right to surgery is considered a matter of life or death. Rees poignantly likens the decision to change sex as “taking the opportunity to jump into the firemen’s blanket because the flames are licking under the door or staying put to be roasted alive” (134). For Prosser, surgery is “a rite of bodily appropriation” (89), a transition that opens up the possibility of *affirming* an embodied existence, a possibility that justifies its considerable financial, emotional, and physical cost.

As responses to feeling disembodied, Prosser’s descriptions of the transsexual “desire for ... coherent embodiment” (203), the “fantasy of restoring the body” (82), and even the “drive to get the body back to what should have been” (83) make psychic sense.²⁰ But from a psychoanalytic

20 I do not read Prosser’s position as prescriptive or applicable to all transsexuals. He does insist that “for some transsexuals, gender identity disorder may be experienced precisely as a disorder, a physically embodied dis-ease or dysphoria that dis-locates the self from bodily home and to which sex reassignment *does* make all the difference” (203). It is interesting to contrast this position with C. Riley Snorton’s (2009: 89) view that “Hope for non-operative, no-hormone transsexuals might be restored through an understanding of passing that does not rely exclusively on the ‘reality’ of the materiality of the transsexual body.”

perspective, something is missing. The feeling of disembodiment tends to be taken at face value as if it expressed in some straightforward way the truth of the body, with no subject to name, to interpret, or to question it. In a curious way that runs counter to Prosser's other concern with narratives, the truth of the body becomes the truth of the subject, and the question of sexed embodiment is reduced to the level of anatomical appearance. While surgery certainly provides a solution to the conflict Prosser and others describe so well, it cannot illuminate the question of "what one suffers from and for," to paraphrase Adam Phillips (1995: xvi). This is where psychoanalytic inquiry arguably has an important contribution to make.

One crucial problem in the history of the clinical literature on transsexuality has been the prevalence of patronizing, moralizing, and stigmatizing attitudes towards transsexuals. Transsexuals' resistance to clinical treatment cannot be understood simply as a defensive posture when negative judgments of clinicians of every persuasion, including psychoanalysts, have been so pervasive. Ethel Spector Person and Lionel Ovesey (1974) made this point a long time ago, and my own survey of the historical, clinical literature mostly confirms it. I suspect that until very recently, many analysts have felt threatened as well as puzzled by transsexuals, and sometimes have had difficulty concealing their repugnance. Leslie Lothstein (1977), for example, offered advice to analysts on how to deal with the negative countertransference he anticipated they would encounter in sessions with transsexuals. We can certainly read as less than impartial A. Limentani's (1979) description of transsexualism as "a personality and characterological disaster" (149), Charles Socarides' (1970) claim that transsexuals are homosexuals "attempting to ward off a paranoid psychosis" (348), and others' use of the dismissive term "deviants." The more enduring source of antagonism between analysts and transsexuals, however, is in the longstanding psychoanalytic view that surgery constitutes an unhelpful compliance with the latter's demand to become the other sex based on a fantasy of psychic redemption through physical transformation. For example, Lawrence Kubie (1974: 382n5) has described sex reassignment surgery as "the most tragic betrayal of human expectation in which medicine and modern endocrinology and surgery have ever engaged."

Fortunately, there are exceptions to these negative trends. There is evidence that some clinicians have learned to ask what matters to transsexuals, as Rubin (2003: 10) claims one ought to do. Betty Steiner (1985), for example, changed her views from hostile to sympathetic, and Lothstein (1982) eventually moved from an anti-surgery position to one that granted its potential benefits. More recent clinical literature on transsexuality reveals a significant shift from the negative views outlined above. Colette Chiland (2000), Danielle Quinodoz (1998), Michael Eigen (1996), and Ruth Stein (1995) all raise critical questions about the status of transsexual fantasy, the role of surgery, and the relationship of the analyst to both. Which aspects of transsexual fantasy are tenable, that

is, capable of being defended or sustained, and which are not? Does the very existence of the fantasy imply that the process to which it is attached ought to be denied? Specifically, should surgery be denied because those who request it believe they will attain an ideal or “phallic” position? Must psychoanalysis and surgery be regarded as mutually exclusive?

It should be noted that psychoanalysts are not in agreement about the unconscious dynamics at work in the production of transsexuality. The more prevalent view has been to understand transsexuality as an expression of conflict that is primarily neurotic (Person and Ovsey 1974, Limentani 1979, Lothstein 1982, Coates 1990, Oppenheimer 1991, Stein 1995, Quinodoz 1998), or perverse (Gershman 1970, Socarides 1970, Volkan and Masri 1989, Barale and Furruta 1997), or psychotic (Kubie 1974, Mitchell 1976, Millot 1990). For Lacanians, neurosis, psychosis, and perversion are the three basic psychical structures of any experience, but there is no “normal” psychical structure against which these could be measured. Dean (1993: 19) argues there is a specifically transsexual structure that marks a troubled “response to castration and the real of sexual difference,” a structure he claims has become culturally pervasive. And while Shepherdson clearly shares Millot’s opinion that for *some* transsexuals surgery would not be psychically healthy, he does support surgery for other transsexuals who have formed identifications with the other sex.

Psychoanalysts worry that transsexuals strive to maintain an untenable fantasy, an idealized image of the other sex they hope to become through surgery. At issue here is not just the conviction that one has been born with the “wrong body,” or that one has made a strong identification with the “other sex.” At issue is the fantasy that becoming the other sex through surgical transformation will make one a wholly different person, a person who will have escaped or transcended conflict and alienation. Lothstein (1979) has referred to this as a “fantasy of rebirth,” where surgery is expected to “resolve all polarities and conflicts” (228). This fantasy manifests itself in Prosser’s idea of possessing a “seamlessly sexed body” (89). But while some transsexuals may pursue this fantasy of perfection (perhaps especially at crucial pre-transition moments?), it may also be abandoned post-transition. Some transsexuals openly question the idealization of the “other” found in what Sandy Stone (1991: 288) calls “narratives of redemption.” What this suggests is that meeting the transsexual demand to become the Other, even when it is accompanied by fantasies of phallic identification, need not result in the confirmation of that fantasy. Although surgery may not be the only way to deal with lives that are experienced as impossible (for some it is not even preferred), it is not the unmitigated failure—let alone moral or ethical catastrophe—that many psychoanalysts fear. Giving up the idealized aspects of surgical reassignment, however, does not mean giving up the desire to bring the body into conformity with gender identity.

The predominant psychoanalytic view is that complicity with the transsexual demand to become the other sex is a mistake since it confirms the fantasy that becoming the other sex will put an end to suffering and colludes with the idea that the subject's internal conflict can be solved by external means. Whether or not surgery is inevitably mistaken (and I do not believe that it is), two specific concerns about the subject support this predominant view.²¹ The first concern is that subjects confront the human limitation of sexed embodiment, and the second concern is that body image should not become confused with possibilities for feeling or acting. However important these concerns may be, they will not be acknowledged as such unless they become disentangled from the negative moral judgments that have typically accompanied them.

One thing clinicians must contend with is that the vast majority of transsexuals claim to be living happier lives after surgery (Bullough and Bullough 1993). Even Lothstein who, in a less than sympathetic vein, argues that surgery cannot repair an "underlying structural narcissistic defect," concedes that "many therapists who tried to change the gender identifications of the transsexual patient back to the original biological sex ... failed to realize that there might be nothing to go back to" (1983: 230, 1979: 230). Given that gender is not determined by biological sex, any attempt to impose an outsider's view of normative congruity can only be read as coercive. In any case, the point I wish to make is that the outcome of surgery may well create the conditions that enable transsexual subjects to achieve the sexed embodiment that many analysts consider indispensable to any human subject.²²

Freud's (1961: 50n1) desire to promote the psychic freedom to make choices lies at the heart of psychoanalysis. But such freedom is not synonymous with the political right to choose surgery on demand, an issue that has raised considerable controversy. Instead, it is an ethical concern born of awareness that any decision-making that has only death as an alternative cannot be described as

21 Another concern is with the very real potential for physical violation by unscrupulous surgeons. Here I agree with Dallas Denny (1991) and other transsexuals who argue that surgery on demand, especially for minors, is unethical. In *Psychic Deadness*, Michael Eigen (1996) describes his experience with an unfortunate teenager who undergoes surgery only to change his mind later. For an argument supporting surgery on demand, see Leslie Feinberg (1996).

22 It is easy to get caught up in debates that construct psychoanalysis and surgery as mutually exclusive ways to address sex/gender dysphoria. Psychoanalysts have a tendency to share the patronizing view expressed by Billings and Urban (1982) that one must choose between self-understanding and surgery. On the contrary, what is most promising in the clinical tradition is the recognition that deciding to pursue psychotherapy need not exclude deciding to pursue surgery, as Person and Ovsey argued in 1974 (190) and as Chiland (2000), Quinodoz (1998), and Eigen (1996) demonstrate in their clinical work.

involving choice. Knowing this, if we are to follow Freud's thinking here, does not preclude surgery, but it may provide an opportunity to weigh one's options and to make a choice where previously none was available. When psychotherapy is recommended by transsexuals (and now by some clinicians as well), it is not in order to have one's decisions made for one, let alone ruled out in advance, but to produce further insight into one's relationship to the body, to sexuality, to the Other, and to oneself.

As Prosser and other transsexuals explore aspects of their psychic lives in more detail, there is a need for an increasingly sophisticated language for making sense of the knowledge they produce. Psychoanalysis can be useful for theorizing transsexual subjectivity when it manages to raise questions about experiences of sexed embodiment and identity without normalizing or pathologizing, and insofar as it promotes the psychic freedom needed to make choices that enable livable lives. These promising aspects of psychoanalytic theory and practice must be distinguished from a judgmental tendency where analysts presume to have the answers in advance and where alternatives like surgery are precluded. Whether the promising aspects of this kind of psychoanalytic work will be pursued by transsexuals or others depends on many factors, including the latter's own desire to know and the ability of analysts to give up their claim to know. Risking the unfamiliar, as Devor and Prosser do, contributes to our understanding of transsexual subjectivity by revealing the diversity of psychic life. As such it fosters a deeper appreciation of the complexities of human embodiment. As I will argue in Chapter 5, this complexity is most threatened today—not by psychoanalytic theory, but by theories of biological reductionism that are widely supported in popular culture.



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Chapter 5

Still Not in Our Genes: Theorizing Complex Bodies¹

Detracting from the complexities of human embodiment and our ability to theorize them is the popularity of what many progressive scholars in both the sciences and the social sciences consider hopelessly dated, sexist, heterosexist, and now transphobic beliefs about the “essence” of human sexuality (Kinsman 1994, 2003, Lancaster 2003). Particularly irksome for feminists is evolutionary psychologists’ claim that men are *by nature* more promiscuous than women and are *naturally* attracted to young women, and that women *naturally* seek stable relationships and are attracted to older men with money. In her spirited critique of evolutionary psychology, Natalie Angier (1999: 48) describes that particular science as “a cranky and despotic Cyclops, its single eye glaring through an overwhelmingly masculinist lens.” And in their still relevant book, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature*, Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin (1984) demonstrate the racist, classist, and sexist focus of biological determinist perspectives, even though their study appears to have been unsuccessful in stemming the tide of its revival.² Whenever these theories assume hegemonic force, based on some new scientific discovery, their power over minorities is renewed. As Margaret Jackson (1989: 17) reminds us in her study of the effects of sexology on the construction of women’s sexuality, “the power to define what is natural has always been absolutely crucial to the maintenance of any system of power relations.” Here, as in other contexts, the natural is opposed to the unnatural, the deviant, the defective, the inferior, and the unintelligible. And despite the useful developments in neuroscience in recent years, the editor of a collection of scientific studies on sex and the brain

1 My title pays tribute to the work of Lewontin et al. (1984) by borrowing a part of their title.

2 A recent article published in Canada’s national newspaper authored by feminist Naomi Wolf reassured readers that if men shirk domestic labour, it is because “the male brain can’t ‘see’ dust or laundry piling up as the female brain often can” (Wolf 2009: A13).

admits that what fuels these studies is the perception that science can solve “what is considered as non-normative behavior” (Einstein 2007: 791).³

More recently through the work of J. Michael Bailey (2003), evolutionary psychology reveals a homophobic and transphobic lens as well, even though some proponents of this theory may themselves be members of queer or trans communities. What Roger Lancaster (2003: 108) argues is a powerful, media-driven fascination with “genetic fetishism” currently reinforces a belief that innate factors such as genes and hormones determine everything from a person’s health to sexual preferences and gender identity. The growth of biotechnology and biobanks arguably create not only new forms of bio-power (Ratto and Beaulieu 2007: 192), but also new “discursive formations” that legitimate the theory and practice of genetics at the expense of alternative discourses (Lopez and Robertson 2007: 202). As one critic writes, “there’s a well-documented tendency to attribute differences in health and disease to something ‘in the blood’ unless there is evidence to the contrary,” a tendency that extends to other kinds of differences as well (Shah 2005). With recourse to what Jeffrey Weeks (1986: 51) aptly calls the “black hole hypothesis,” biological explanations are assumed to exist when no other definitive explanations for differences can be found, or indeed where other explanations have been discredited.

Given that human and non-human species evince a diversity of sexual behavior, what is at stake in the belief that nature is the primary cause of sexual diversity in humans? What are the advantages and disadvantages of supporting this claim for transpersons and others who aim to advance the social and political status of various sexual and gender minorities? Claiming a natural basis for difference is sometimes believed to enhance acceptance, especially for transsexuals whose access to hormones and surgery requires justification by the medical profession. Unlike those queer and transpersons who do not experience extreme gender dysphoria or who do not seek medical intervention, transsexuals may well find that bio-determinist theory offers a more compelling account of their suffering and a more strategic rationale for achieving their goals. The appeal of this position is understandable when one considers what is at stake and when adopting a non-bio-determinist position is assumed to weaken the legitimacy of medical intervention.

My concern is that adopting bio-reductive theories is dangerous not only for those transgender and queer persons who claim to choose their gender

3 I do not dismiss outright all scientific attempts to study the effects of genes on human life, much less the neurological discoveries that enable the recovery of bodily functions that have been damaged. The point is to avoid genetic determinism, which seems to be rampant (Carey 2009, Maté 2007: A19). In this respect, I agree with Maté’s point that “It’s not that genes don’t matter ... it’s only that they can’t determine even simple behaviours, let alone the infinitely complex ... process that is a human life.”

and sexuality, but also for those transsexuals who claim that the experience of gender dysphoria overrides the question of choice. Can the demand for accepting differences believed to have a biological etiology be met without the concomitant threat of genetically engineering some differences out of existence? Can it be achieved without playing into conservative constructions of queer or transpersons as passive victims of nature's cruel tendency to produce "maladaptive" (Bailey 2003: 116) forms of humanity? Even when experience and "rearing" are considered to be factors in creating sexual dimorphism, what are the consequences of attributing unexpected forms of sexuality to "defective or unexpressed genes" (Einstein 2007: 3)? Einstein is compelled to remind readers that "humans are not rodents" (791). But she nevertheless reveals the shared hypothesis of behavioral and neuroendocrinologists concerning gay and trans identities: "that organizational/activational mechanisms [that is, brain and hormones] shape human sexual orientation and gender identification just as they shape rodent sexual behavior" (661). Einstein remains critical of hypotheses of feminized and masculinized brains in transsexuals, noting that the evidence is "provocative but very thin," and that it suggests, problematically, that the "underlying causes" of transsexuality and homosexuality are the same (Einstein 2007: 663). She thus provides good reason to suggest that queer critiques of biological determinism have some relevance for trans theory. Finally, despite the recent infatuation with neurobiology, even Einstein describes its relationship to gay and trans identities as "speculative and sensational" (2007: xvi).⁴ In my view, this is all the more reason to inquire into the advantages and challenges involved in adopting an alternative view, one that would understand human sexuality as a complex result of biological potential mediated by social and psychic factors.

In the first section of this chapter, I address some of the arguments for and against biological theories as found in scientific studies on transsexuality, materialist feminist re-valuations of biology, and queer theorists' objections to those theories. Without collapsing the differences between queer, transgender, and transsexual experience, I focus on the structural similarities that exist in arguments for and against attributing either sexual preference or gender identity to genes or hormones. To illustrate the danger of bioreductive theory, I examine debates surrounding Bailey's (2003) controversial book, *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism*, debates that reveal how a disquieting if not oppressive use of evolutionary psychology has been played out to the detriment of transsexuals. In the final section, I revisit John Colapinto's

4 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who urged me to engage with this literature. I note that its repeated gesture toward, and complete inability to theorize concepts like "experience," "rearing," "treatment," and "circumstances," make it less likely that any "reconciliation" with humanities approaches to embodiment is on the horizon.

(2000) interpretation of David Reimer—one that attributes to nature David’s decision to live as a man—as a problematic view that is far from obsolete and that occludes other ways of making sense of Reimer’s experience. In offering an alternative to Colapinto’s interpretation and to the “nature or nurture” debate it engages, I suggest that theorizing social and psychic complexity is more promising for understanding the production of diverse identities than asserting natural diversity. In all three of these discussions, I promote the value of psychosocial complexity and its relevance to trans studies by pointing not only to the negative consequences of bioreductive theories, but also to important aspects that the latter view excludes.

Biological Reductionism Revisited

Although bioreductive theories are contested by anthropologists and queer theorists, by the psychoanalytic theorists I find persuasive, and also by scientists who argue for the interaction of bio/psycho/social processes (Einstein 2008, Fausto-Sterling 2000, 2005, Lewontin et al. 1984), there is little cause for complaisance. At present, whole teams of neurologists, biologists, psychiatrists, and psychoneuroendocrinologists are avidly searching for a biological cause for transsexuality (as they previously did for homosexuality). Earlier studies purport to have located a protein in the Mtf brain that resembles similar proteins in non-trans women’s brains (Kruijver et al. 2000, Zhou et al. 1995). Conducted postmortem on the brains of transwomen, this research claims to have found a biological signifier of gender difference that appears to correspond with the identities embraced by those women during their lives (whether or not they took hormones). How this finding is interpreted is another matter, since critical studies of biology also reveal that the social environment affects the human body in ways that transform it (Fausto-Sterling 2000, Lewontin et al. 1984). Writing from a marxist perspective, Lewontin et al. understand human development itself as the result of “a dialectical development of organism and milieu in response to each other” (275). Thus, biological science itself suggests that we do not need to contest the findings of female-coded proteins in the brains of transwomen to argue *against* a simple biological cause, to argue for example that one’s identification with, or sexed embodiment as, women will produce multiple effects on the body at the level of the organism. Even if the researchers seeking to establish a biological cause could prove the existence of such proteins from birth, they would need to prove that all genetic males who possess them will be transgendered, and that all transwomen possess these proteins.

The best of these researchers acknowledge that genes do *not* determine human identity, and that “psychosocial and environmental influences” as well

as “hormonal exposures” affect brain structures (Luders et al. 2009: 906). One collaborative team concludes that

it remains to be established whether pre-, peri-, or postnatal hormonal effects in early childhood could foster transsexualism. Further studies will need to resolve the degree to which genetic variability and environmental factors influence the development of gender identity ... possibly (but not necessarily) via affecting brain structures. (Luders et al. 2009: 906)

Another collaborative team who claim to have conducted “the largest genetic study of transsexualism,” a study that sought to link Mtf transsexuality with “gene variants responsible for undermasculinization and/or feminization,” could only reach a speculative conclusion (Hare et al. 2009: 95, 93). These researchers are careful to state that biological factors are “implicated” (Hare et al. 2009: 93) and carefully employ speculative language, even while they seek evidence of genetic causes. But as I will demonstrate with the example of Bailey, some researchers resort to more “controversial” claims about innate differences (Luders et al. 2009: 907). Raising critical questions concerning the implications of relying on biological explanations alone, these studies return us to the problem of choosing among competing views. Just as the researchers of brain proteins cannot prove their assumption that trans subjects are determined from birth by these proteins, the alternative researchers cannot prove their assumption that physiological transformations occur as a result of trans identifications (consciously or unconsciously made). On what grounds, then, do we choose among competing views?

Some feminists have turned to more complex biological theories, what they call the “new materialism” (Hird 2004a), to account for human and non-human sexual diversity.⁵ These theorists promote a return to science and to non-linear biology to gain a better understanding of bodies and matter, not in opposition to culture, but in opposition to the view that culture is malleable and bodies are static or fixed (Hird 2004b: 88). According to Myra Hird (2004a: 230–1), the new materialism enables us to “understand sexual difference from a biological perspective that takes the evolution of sex itself as a contingent consequence of random chance events.” She suggests we pay attention to the “agency” of matter such as bacteria, which is largely indifferent to sex and which is productive of diversity:

5 Other key sources for this theory cited by Hird (231–2) are: Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (2000), Manuel De Landa (1997), Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan (1997), and Elizabeth Wilson (1998).

in non-linear biology, the penultimate embodiment of queer may be bodies themselves ... Non-linear biology also provides a growing catalogue of homosexual, transgender, and non-reproductive heterosexual behaviour in animals that defies the traditional homosexual/heterosexual boundary. Gay parenting, lesbianism, homosexuality, sex-changing, and other behaviours in animals are prevalent in living matter. (2004b: 87)

In his contribution to *Hypatia's* recent issue on trans, Riki Lane (2009: 146) similarly promotes the new materialism, arguing that “rich resources for feminist and trans analysis” lie in the understanding that “biology produces sex and gender diversity in processes that are nonlinear, chaotic, dynamic, and indeterminate.” While none of the studies on trans Lane cites provide evidence for biological causation (despite the claims of some authors to do so), the most he can claim is that “there are complex interactions in which biological factors certainly play a role in forming unique gender identities” (150). Moreover, there appears to be a simple inversion (not a “displacement”) of claims previously made with respect to the opposition of nature and culture at work in Lane’s (142) assertion that “evolution and nature are full of diversity and dynamism while human society and culture has much rigidity and fixity.”

If queer sex is produced by nature itself, of course, no other explanation for diverse human sexuality is required. A positive outcome of this view is that rigid moral and political judgments of sexual diversity are called into question. One implication of adopting this view for intersexed persons, for example, is that the imposition of genital reconstruction on infants to ensure “normative” appearance would lose its current justification. A negative outcome is the tendency to privilege biology once again—albeit in its newfound, queerly elaborated form—as key to understanding sexuality, identity, and embodiment.

In *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Elizabeth Wilson (2004: 3) similarly argues for a return to the somatic, stating that we need to explore the value of biological events in relation to neurological theories in order to see what “new modes of embodiment become legible when biological reductionism is tolerated and explored.” Perversely, in my view, Wilson suggests that Freud’s “moments of biological reduction” produce the most promising theory of body and the psyche. While Freud’s notion of “somatic compliance” in discussions of hysteria does confirm that a “psychophysical aptitude for hysteria” or “*the capacity for conversion*” (Wilson 2004: 11) is shared by all of us, Wilson’s affirmation of “the centrality of biology to the etiology of psychopathology” marks a significant departure from psychoanalytic thought. Her view that “the proclivity to conversion (diversion, perversion) is native to biochemical, physiological, and nervous systems” (13) makes sense in this context and it comes as no surprise to psychoanalysts. However, this view seems to undermine the point that how and why these systems “wander,” become eroticized, paralyzed, or

disturbed is a matter of the unconscious meanings invested in them. Thus, her critique of feminist “antibiologism” (13) and her promotion of “tolerance for reductive formulations” (14) strike me as curiously unbalanced. Clearly, she believes overstating her case is required. But tolerance for reductionism also appears to conflict with the reading of Freud she offers, a reading that favors “a relation between psyche and soma in which there is a mutuality of influence, a mutuality that is interminable and constitutive” (22). Moreover, this idea of mutual implication (as opposed to reductionism) appears to support her view that in psychoanalysis “the critical problematic of determinism has been displaced: it becomes meaningless to charge that psychic forces are governed by the soma if the soma itself is already psychic, cognitive, and affective” (23). If her goal is to promote Freud’s understanding that there is “a consanguinity of nerves, psyche, and gut that even the most sophisticated of contemporary knowledges are still struggling to grasp” (43), then it is difficult to imagine how we get there by recommending reductive formulations of any kind.⁶

What does this new materialism imply for those who choose to surgically alter their sex? As a theory, it suggests that whatever sexual identity we find ourselves inhabiting has little to do with our unconscious desires, conscious intentions, relations to others, or to dominant cultural practices and discourses, and everything to do with the contingent and chaotic productions of biological processes. Whether or not the new materialism marks a significant departure from more conventional bioreductionist theories that attribute diverse sexualities and identities to natural causes remains unclear. It seems just as likely to be open to criticisms made of the latter by those cultural and biological theorists who insist on theorizing the dynamic interaction of biological, psychical, and cultural factors.

Although somewhat more attentive to personal and cultural factors than psychical ones, Gary Kinsman (1994, 2003) and Roger Lancaster (2003) both provide valuable arguments against attributing sexual preference to biology. According to Kinsman (2003) the argument for acceptance on the basis of biological or natural disposition is questionable on four counts. First, when that disposition is seen as a form of deviation, it invites biological correction through attempts at genetic manipulation (277). Second, when that disposition is seen as a form of impurity, it invites elimination through murder or abortion of “afflicted” persons (the Nazi persecution and murder of gays and lesbians are cited as one historical example of this [279]). Third, it is an argument that legitimates what Kinsman deems a questionable concept of rights, “where ‘rights’ are often only seen to be justified when derived from ‘natural,’ immutable

6 I remain unconvinced that the return to evolutionary theory Wilson also recommends to feminists will be successful in overcoming the pitfalls of its neo-Darwinian formulation via evolutionary psychology.

differences,” not political choices (281). Fourth, it is an argument that prevents alliances with other non-recognized or delegitimized minorities as it is not centrally concerned with coalitions against a heterosexist, normative gender order, but with justifying a place for one’s own divergence from that gender order or with justifying one’s place within it (283). These difficulties at the root of arguments for queer acceptance deserve serious consideration insofar as they may be extended, as Kinsman suggests, to trans arguments for recognition that are based on claims to innate disposition.

In his critique of contemporary trends in science and popular culture that attributes normative and non-normative identities and sexualities to nature, Lancaster (2003) usefully extends and updates the analyses of Kinsman and Lewontin et al.⁷ Wielding the tools of marxist anthropology as well as a good deal of humor, Lancaster characterizes the return to biological determinism as a form of “genetic fetishism” (2003: 108) that reifies human subjectivity and that carries the political threat of prescribing conformity and proscribing people’s choices and freedom.⁸ He eloquently demonstrates how our “cultural fixation on genetic causes” has intensified in the new millennium, producing what he aptly calls “genomania” (14). More ideology than science, genomania has damaging effects on sexual minorities as well as on heterosexuals who refuse heteronormative ideals. Like Kinsman, Lancaster rejects the turn to natural causes not only as “bad politics,” but also as “bad science (and especially bad *social science*)” (10). Lancaster offers an extensive critique of this increasingly popular craze for locating genetic causes for sexual identity and desire, some of which covers the familiar ground summarized above with respect to Kinsman. More importantly for my purposes, he also clarifies three crucial conceptual, theoretical, and political problems that concern:

1. natural models of desire
2. the meaning of sexual difference
3. the masquerade of ideology as science.

7 Interestingly, Lancaster (2003: 12) notes that despite the new craze, there are “no new scientific discoveries that would clinch the case for ‘nature’ over ‘nurture’ on any question of social import.” Furthermore, he notes that “the facts remain much what they were in 1984, when Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin wrote: ‘up to the present time no one has been able to relate any aspect of human social behavior to any particular gene or set of genes.’”

8 Lancaster defines genetic fetishism as: “reification in the strictest sense of the term: It ascribes human powers, actions, and attributes to chains of nucleotides. But more profoundly, the idea that desire can be dislodged from its cultural context, demarcated from other perceptual practices, and abstracted or frozen from the ongoing flow of social life also belongs to the order of reification and fetishism” (407n21).

These problems merit careful examination because, as I will show, they also inform popular misconceptions and simplifications of human sexuality as found in Bailey's reading of transsexuality and in Colapinto's reading of David Reimer.

Several conceptual difficulties associated with the naturalization of desire worry Lancaster. The first is the common mistake of invoking a socially constructed heterosexual norm as the touchstone of natural desire. This means that *other* desires are necessarily flawed, and the subjects of these desires are unnatural, monstrous, or deviant. Queer and trans subjects are "invited to pick our place in nature as either *variations on* or *deformations of* a heterosexual privilege" (39). This point has led me to rethink the concept of "gender variance" as more than a neutral or umbrella term, as it necessarily refers back to the unspoken yet dominant norms of gender. To those who attempt to avoid this problem by extending the natural model of desire to non-normative desires, Lancaster responds that this move, even though it circumvents the privileging of heterosexual normative desire, does not succeed in *explaining* human sexuality (114). It does not succeed because the naturalization of desire ignores the fact that what we make of nature matters, and it ignores the "social practices and cultural beliefs that inflect and diversify whatever we all have in common as natural organisms, especially with regard to such matters as gender roles, sexual relations, and bodily identities" (171).

Not only does attributing desire to nature serve to deny the conscious self who makes choices (233), it reduces desire to a thing that emanates from a particular type of person instead of understanding it as a process, a relationship to self and others. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Lancaster characterizes desire as follows:

Desire is an opening, not a closure, a relationship, not a thing. It is not within us, but without. It encloses us. We cannot quite *see* our desires, because we are immersed within them: They are the very medium of our actions and thoughts, the perspective from which and through which we see and feel. This desire is on the side of poetry, in the original and literal sense of the word: *poiesis*, 'production,' as in the making of things and the world. Not an object at all, desire is what makes objects possible. (266)

This interpretation of desire offers us a conception that avoids reification, and enables us to understand that even though desire may have specific aims and objects, these are the complex and mostly unconscious products of a subject's relation to language, to others, and to one's own self-image. Although Lancaster does not advance a psychoanalytic interpretation, he does have a place for unconscious determinations, and his point that reducing desire to a thing indicates a failure to grasp those determinations is well taken (267).

A second problem concerns coming to terms with the question of sexual difference. Like Marx and Freud, Lancaster (198) does not deny biological differences but insists that they are the “site of cultural elaborations” that are inseparable from, yet not reducible to, those differences. Making a point that becomes particularly salient in considerations of trans and intersexed lives, Lancaster states:

It is culture that organizes and gives meaning to biological experiences, not the other way around. Or ... in human affairs, meanings are made around material questions in such a way that cultural contingency precedes biological necessity, so much so that what is considered ‘biologically necessary’ is itself often a function of cultural conditioning. (198)

This emphasis on culture does not mean that the mind is simply a blank slate, and here Lancaster refers approvingly to Claude Lévi-Strauss to include psychic structure in a non-reductive way: “neural structures are not the ‘sources’ or ‘causes’ of meaning. They are the grounds on which meanings take root. Meaning is not ‘in’ the neural structures, but in the open-ended interaction between perceptive bodies and a universe of signs” (220). Here I would add that without denying the “perceptive bodies” on which Lancaster places his emphasis, the conscious or unconscious embrace or refusal of meaning concerns the *subject’s* relation to the social and to language. The psychoanalytic emphasis I favor (and to which I return below) refers us not to some hardwired and predetermining biological factor, but to the drive and to the embodied and desiring subject in interaction with others. This emphasis adds a psychological dimension to the complexity Lancaster strives to articulate, especially when he acknowledges a place for unconscious processes in our understanding of sexual diversity.

Lancaster concedes the anthropological fact that human beings do tend to “reinvent ‘male’ and ‘female’ as basic social categories” (225). But for him the signification of difference does not always come to mean “stable, permanent, [or] ‘opposite’ sexes” (221). If, as Adam Phillips (1995: 86) claims, we need to remember that “sameness, like difference, is a (motivated) fantasy not a natural fact,” then the sense we make of sexual difference is indeed subject to “the most varied formulations” (Lancaster 2003: 229). Perhaps particularly relevant for trans subjects is Lancaster’s point that constraints are not so much given by natural differences, but by our understanding of what those differences mean. The fact that meanings are culturally assigned to the sexes does not preclude the elaboration of more than two: “Nothing in the distinction between male and female dictates how many other sexes might be discriminated, what their roles and relations might be, or what meanings might be said to follow from these distinctions and relations” (226). Even though others will understand this elaboration as the proliferation of gender identities,

this formulation strikes me as felicitous.⁹ Without denying the existence of sexual difference, and without relegating trans or intersexed persons to some impossible place outside of sexual difference, Lancaster's view nevertheless allows for other possibilities. And in another appropriately complex manner, Lancaster suggests that "transsexuality mediates, complicates, and qualifies the absoluteness of the opposition between male and female" (225). Such a claim marks a departure from readings that construe transsexuality as a natural aberration, maladaptation, or genetic defect.

The third problem clarified by Lancaster concerns the politics of ideology masquerading as science. I will demonstrate with respect to Bailey's account of transsexuality and Colapinto's account of David Reimer that both authors resort to biological determinism in order to promote a particular version of heteronormative order. For Lancaster, these accounts can be read as failed attempts to control people—their desires, their behavior, and their potential—precisely at a time when there is more acceptance of diversity than ever. Clearly, the desire to control is more dangerous for those whose desires or bodies escape or refuse normative configurations (278). But for Lancaster, the political impetus is to entrench a scientific claim to the natural precisely at a moment when the stereotypes it has produced risk being delegitimized:

The public is entreated to revisit the evolutionary origins of desire—to appreciate the compelling logic of "courtship ritual," to understand the necessity of male/female "pair bonding," to see the beauty of those "eternal laws" of family formation, and to assimilate their implications for essential manhood and womanhood (all of this supposedly deducible from basic genetic principles ineradicably encoded in every cell)—at *precisely* the moment that all of this is in crisis ... It is no accident that men, women, and others are given a serious-sounding scientific discourse on eternal man and natural woman, locked in timeless embrace, at the very moment that every sex stereotype has come to seem dated, unreliable, and funny. (294–6)

In other words, the ideological impetus behind the insistence on human desire as natural, and sexual difference as heteronormatively fixed, is an attempt to control what in fact is never within our control. Fuelled by a conservative "desire

9 Phillips illuminates this as follows: "Starting with two sexes, as we must—described as opposites or alternatives or complements—locks us into a logic, a limiting binary system, that often seems remote from lived, spoken experience ... We should be speaking of paradoxes and spectrums, not contradictions and mutual exclusion" (1995: 84). Noting that "we will never know how many gender identities we are capable of" (80), he insists that selves are "always provisional and circumstantial, not creatures of either/or (to suffer is often to feel a self fixed in something)" (84).

for order, stability, and certainty” (329), the scientific recourse to innate factors eclipses our ability to understand, let alone to tolerate or accept, challenges to sexual normativity. We need to be able to recognize and critique these efforts as they threaten to limit and to circumscribe our lives, and sometimes to punish those who resist predefined, essentialized norms.

Both Kinsman and Lancaster argue persuasively that claims to natural causes of sexuality ignore the complexity, multiplicity, and potential mutability of sexuality, the differences of power within sexual minorities, and the human practices that shape sexuality. Complexities are overlooked when one assumes people are simply born with specific gender characteristics or that people’s “lived experiences and erotic practices” (Kinsman 2003: 283) lack contradiction and ambiguity. Such assumptions play into the dominant system of gender categorization wherein one is born either gay or straight, and where knowing one’s place is important. They imply that sexuality and gender do not change over time, and are incapable of the fluidity Kate Bornstein (1994: 51–2), for example, describes. Even if most people tend to adopt a sex-congruent gender identity for the duration of their lives, transgender persons who cross sex, who identify as two-spirited, or who locate themselves beyond sex suggest that human subjects are not simply determined by nature to inhabit one sex one way. Believing that we are would render the undecided or those whose gender fluctuates unnatural, abnormal, or simply mad. Even if most transsexuals understand their gender to be more firmly entrenched than transgendered persons do, both groups represent a diversity of experience and a relationship to cross-sexing that cannot be accounted for through claims to nature, except in a tautological way.

Another example of this tautology can be found in research on transsexuality by V.S. Ramachandran and Paul D. McGeoch (2007b, 2008). The authors initially hypothesized that transsexuals’ brains are “hard-wired” for the opposite sex, possibly due to some prenatal error of development (2007b: 1002). They predicted that post-operative transsexuals would be less likely to experience phantom penises or breasts than non-transsexuals who have undergone amputations of these body parts. While I fully expected the authors’ prediction to prove correct, and it did, such an outcome does *not* support their conclusion that a gender-specific body image is therefore “innate” or “hard-wired” into our brains. One could just as easily hypothesize that transsexuals whose psychological investments in the other sex results in the desired surgical solution are less likely to experience previous ill-suited body parts as phantom body parts because those parts do not correspond to the body image associated with the sex they have become. Favoring the psychosocial explanation is not attributable to “neuron envy” as Ramachandran believes (cited in Miller 2008: 847), but to another logical possibility that cannot be wished away by reducing human psychic life to brain functions.

Finally, the biological determinist view omits questions of psychic agency and subjective decision-making. I would argue that for transgendered persons, as for anyone else, the identity one assumes is not reducible to biological forces of the organism but to the subjective investments of the subject (both conscious and unconscious) that are socially mediated. Whatever sexual identity one adopts, refuses, or alters will affect one's relationship to this biological potential. Assuming a sexual identity, ambiguous or not, is the result of negotiating our own desires, the desires of others, and "the social and political choices, alliances, connections, and solidarities we make and build based on these" (Kinsman 2003: 282). To reduce the diversity that exists not only between groups but also among groups to some natural determinant is to ignore the complexity of human subjectivity and our potential to embrace, to refuse, or to otherwise negotiate sexual identities. As my discussion of Bailey will demonstrate, such reduction lends itself too easily to the conservative abuses that claims to nature perpetuate, and risks subverting the more radical goals of both its supporters and its detractors.

The Man Who Would Be King: Bailey's Take on Transsexuality and Truth

It has now become impossible to address Bailey's (2003) book without engaging the lengthy debate about the "scandal" that has become inextricably bound up with it (Dreger 2008b: 503). In an article that appears along with 23 responses (plus her rejoinder) in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Alice Dreger (2008a, 2008b) investigates the "backlash" against Bailey, a backlash spearheaded by three transwomen, Lynn Conway, Andrea James, and Deirdre McCloskey. Concluding that the allegations impugning Bailey's research and related activities are unfounded, Dreger (2008a: 366) condemns the unsavory tactics employed by Conway, James, and McCloskey to "ruin" him. The latter did indeed intend to discredit Bailey who they believe acted unethically, if not illegally, in producing his book on gay men and transwomen. Strategies employed to this end ranged from filing complaints about his alleged lack of professional ethics to internet images ridiculing Bailey that used sexualized photos of his children. Most of the 23 respondents to Dreger's article, including the eight self-identified trans contributors, explicitly condemn the worst of these tactics, although there is serious disagreement about the ethics of his research.¹⁰

10 In a very legalistic approach to complaints about Bailey, Dreger finds that he did not require ethics approval for his research (because the IRB board claims he didn't), did not require informed consent from his research subjects (because they were stories told before his book got underway), and did not practice psychology without a licence

Despite Dreger's (2008b: 503) emphasis on the scandalous response to Bailey, some respondents suggest that the publication of the book itself constitutes a scandal insofar as it is offensive and damaging to the reputation of transwomen. John Bancroft (2008: 426), for example, describes his initial concern "that this book would disturb and offend many transgendered individuals who read it, and contribute to the stigmatization of the transgender community." Because the idea of the book itself as scandalous risks getting lost in Dreger's relocation of the scandal in the widely condemned tactics, my account will focus on the scandal of the book itself with its claim to science and its negative effects for transwomen.¹¹

Where Dreger may have "missed an opportunity to intervene in damaging discourses on transsexuality" (Clarkson 2008: 443), others have intervened (often brilliantly) in their responses to Dreger's analysis. The collective responses go beyond the obvious and widely shared view that personal attacks on authors are unacceptable, and they broaden the focus of the debate beyond Dreger's concern with the complaints against Bailey. In highlighting the social and political context of transsexuality, the critical responses to Bailey's thesis provide compelling evidence for reading *The Man Who Would be Queen (TMWWBQ)* as a damaging attack on transwomen. Whether one reads the trans community's outraged response as "narcissistic" or not (a point to which I return), the anger that erupted following the publication of Bailey's book is thoughtfully accounted for by many of the trans and non-trans *Archives* respondents. Reading their arguments and heeding their anger has led me to reassess my earlier reading

(because he did not accept payment for the letters he wrote recommending transwomen for surgery). Dreger concedes he ought to have been more sensitive toward one trans participant (Anjelica Kieltyka), although she claims Kieltyka ought to have known better. Several respondents, including fellow scientists, disagree with Dreger's reasoning here. Charles Moser (2008: 473) sums up the opposition best as follows:

It is important to realize that Bailey did field research for *TMWWBQ* [*The Man Who Would be Queen*] without IRB approval, did not obtain informed consent from his "subjects," and he did engage in activities that could be construed as practicing psychology without a licence. All these acts were judged *not* to be a violation of law, ethics, or university rules. The complaints were not spurious; they also were not actual violations.

11 A scandal includes one or more of the following elements:

1. Any act or set of circumstances that brings about disgrace or offends the morality of the social community; a public disgrace.
2. The reaction caused by such an act or set of circumstances; outrage; shame.
3. Any talk damaging to the character; malicious gossip.
4. Damage to reputation or character caused by offensive or grossly improper behavior; a disgrace.
5. One whose conduct brings about disgrace or defamation. (*American Heritage Dictionary* 1971: 1158)

of the obvious contradictions in Bailey's thought as *merely* contradictions, and to conclude that thinly veiled hypocrisy is at work.¹² To be sure, Bailey claims that his book was designed to promote the acceptance of transpersons (176), and he clearly supports sex reassignment surgery. Moreover, he openly admires at least some of the transsexuals whose life stories he reads as exemplifying the theory he endorses (212). But unless we assume that Bailey possesses an astonishingly poor grasp of logic or an unusual lack of clarity about his own position (my previous, more charitable view), we are bound to conclude that his claim to admire and support transpersons while describing them as examples of maladaptive human development (and some of them as liars) bespeaks a disturbing lack of both sensitivity and sincerity.

Bailey's biological determinist theory, with its problematic and reductionist claims, forms another piece of the context that gets short shrift in the *Archives* debate.¹³ This theory will be discussed along with the other major criticisms as it addresses the larger argument of this chapter: that biological determinist theories, whether they subscribe wholly or only in part to the evolutionary theory that is so widespread, oversimplify and serve to stigmatize their "others," whoever they may be.

As I have outlined above with reference to Lancaster, evolutionary theorists believe that human behavior is rooted in nature and is the end result of a process of evolution where human beings adapt to their environments. A psychology professor at Northwestern University, Bailey promotes a version of this essentialist theory and its concomitant idea that people with queer or trans identities are "evolutionarily maladaptive" (Bailey 2003: 116). For him, and for other supporters of this theory, homosexuality, and by extension at least some forms of transsexuality, represent a paradox, if not "the most striking unresolved paradox of human evolution" (115). Naively hoping to distinguish himself from "right-wing conservatives" who emphasize differences in order to condemn sexual minorities, Bailey claims that we need to know who the transgendered are in order to accept them (176). Arguing that people cannot help being who they are because we are all products of "early and irreversible developmental processes in the brain" (207) may be one way to make a case for the acceptance of supposedly innate human diversity. But there is no way

12 My previous critique (Elliot 2004b), written four years before Dreger's article made the backlash against Bailey's book into the "real" scandal, became a book review that Ken Zucker had agreed to consider for *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Following its submission, however, I received no reply, and no response to my follow-up inquiries was offered. While I am glad that he published both positive and negative responses to Dreger's article, I suspect that Dreger is mistaken in her claim that Zucker is "fully committed to open, scholarly dialogue on these matters" (2008b: 509).

13 Nicols (2008) offers a brief but important critique of this theory.

to escape the normative distinction evolutionary psychology sets up between the well-ordered, adaptive forms those processes take in heterosexual men like Bailey and the disordered, maladaptive forms those processes take in gay or transpeople. Here the claim to benevolence is called into question by the prejudicial stereotypes endemic to evolutionary psychology. As Kinsman and Lancaster have argued, scientific claims to locate purely natural causes for gender and sexual minorities are never simply the positive celebration of difference that proponents wish them to be.¹⁴

It becomes apparent just how far from the positive celebration of difference Bailey is when we examine the specific argument he makes about Mtfs falling into one of two categories of maladaptive failure. Taking up Ray Blanchard's (1989a, 1989b, 2005, 2008) research on "autogynephilia" (which literally means love of oneself as a woman), Bailey categorizes the Mtf transsexuals discussed in the third part of his study as either disordered gay men (the "homosexual transsexuals") or as disordered straight men (the "autogynephilics").¹⁵ Specifically, Bailey asserts that one can only understand transsexuality by focusing on its sexual nature (understood narrowly as biologically programmed sexual arousal) and not on identity, culture, or other complex psychic processes. In other words, "homosexual transsexuals" are considered men who become women in order to attract the men they love, and autogynephilics are considered "misdirected" heterosexual men who "become the women they love" (xii). Although Bailey professes to take a pro-gay and pro-trans position (105, 176), his choice of evolutionary psychology as a theoretical framework reduces persons to their allegedly biological and reproductive nature, and then stigmatizes those who deviate from the normative evolutionary path as maladaptive and disordered.

Bailey further claims that *all* "non-homosexual" transsexuals are autogynephilic. Turning Blanchard's somewhat more nuanced research into

14 A substantial portion of Bailey's book is devoted to discussing why it is not unreasonable to assume that feminine men are more likely to be gay than straight, and to proving that intuitions based on stereotypes are often correct (a curious and questionable preoccupation). My critical discussion will focus, instead, on the contradictory and contentious claims about transwomen. Ftm transsexuals are not addressed by Bailey on the grounds that "masculine females deserve their own book" (Bailey 2003: xii).

15 In his response to Dreger, Blanchard (2008: 435) reiterates his earlier definition of autogynephilia as "the propensity to be sexually aroused by cross-gender ideation." Otherwise referred to as "heterosexual" transsexuals, the autogynephiles are believed to differ from the "homosexual" transsexuals, as the former are "less conspicuously feminine in boyhood," are more likely to request "sex reassignment at a later age," have "a less convincing appearance when dressed as women," have "more extensive histories of penile erection with or without masturbation during cross-dressing," and are "more likely to report histories of erotic arousal in association with the thought or image of themselves as women."

scientific truth, Bailey claims autogynephilia is the *only* way to understand Mtf's who do not seek exclusively male partners. Not only are autogynephilic transsexuals said to suffer from a "developmental error," they are also thought to share at least one of the other paraphilias, such as "masochism, sadism, exhibitionism ... frotteurism ... necrophilia, bestiality, and pedophilia" (171). Following Blanchard's concern that some autogynephilic transsexuals deny the eroticism associated with this typological category, Bailey claims that autogynephilic transsexuals tend to be liars, especially when it comes to the "erotic component" of their gender-bending (173). Potential liars and masochists, these transwomen are also said to be "obsessed" with proving their feminine selves are primary (175). This pathologizing view is elevated to the status of truth, whereas the alternative, heterogeneous views offered by trans and non-trans theorists are lumped together and dismissed as unscientific beliefs in "feminine essence."

Clearly, the version of Blanchard's theory of autogynephilia produced in *TMWVBQ* creates a damning stereotype of non-heterosexual Mtf's, even though the evidence Bailey offers for these claims is "admittedly scanty" (172). Speculating on the "causes" of autogynephilia, Bailey resorts to gut intuition, declaring that particular behaviors such as dressing in women's lingerie "smells innate to me" (170). Given Bailey's theoretical commitment to reducing complex identities and behavior to biology, we should not be too surprised by his claim to innate behavior or by his rhetorical recourse to sense perceptions to make such a claim. What is surprising is that this version of Blanchard's theory should be touted as "first rate science ... remarkably free of ideology" as David Buss claims on the book jacket, or even as "the science of transsexuality," as Bailey's subtitle states. Bailey's unwarranted elevation of this already contentious theory to the status of scientific fact, his insistence on the truth of Blanchard's model while simultaneously disparaging alternative models, and his insensitive if not contemptuous treatment of transpersons, represent three of the most often cited weaknesses. Designed to provoke, these three aspects and the critical responses to them by *Archives* respondents (among others) further support my reading of Bailey's text as scandalous.

Few readers of *TMWVBQ* fail to notice the "insensitive" representation of Mtf's that pervades Bailey's text, although considerable variation appears in the ultimate judgments made about such insensitivity and about its impact on transpersons. Even Dreger and Anne Lawrence (2008), who find considerable merit in Bailey's theory, contend that he is insensitive. Less inclined to understate, others condemn his "derisive comments and contemptuous tone" as "inflammatory" (Moser 2008: 474, 473) and his theory as "sensationalist, sexualized, and deeply pathologizing" (Lane 2008: 454), if not "transphobic" (Bettcher 2008, Nicols 2008).

“Insensitivity” can be found on many levels here. The sensitivity which researchers typically extend towards research participants, particularly those belonging to marginalized and oppressed groups, is markedly absent in Bailey’s text. Transpersons are rarely cited, although Bailey devotes a good deal of time to describing their appearance and their lives. Of course, if you believe that a significant number “tell stories about themselves that are misleading and ... false” (146), then there is considerably less incentive to pay attention to what they say. This accusation of willful deception is problematic in several ways. First, it goes beyond the deliberate strategies of resistance Stone (1991: 291) calls “careful repositioning,” which transsexuals often engage in order to get their treatment approved. Second, it challenges the credibility of many prominent spokespersons in the trans community, since Bailey claims most of them are autogynephiles (174). Finally, it undermines the legitimacy of alternative experiences and understandings of trans people whom Bailey believes should be grouped together as autogynephilic. Given that Bailey follows Blanchard in making sexual orientation *the key factor* in understanding transsexuality, the presumption that many tell lies about their erotic lives is not only offensive, but also makes any claims to the contrary necessarily suspect, if not downright impossible.

Contributing to a damaging divisiveness in the trans community is Anne Lawrence, a prominent transgendered doctor who endorses Blanchard’s theory of autogynephilia as well as Bailey’s book. A self-identified autogynephile, Lawrence claims her trans patients find his theory “comforting and liberating” and that his “conclusions and opinions are identical to my own” (2004a). When trans activists lobbied to have *TMWWBQ* removed from the Lambda Literary Award shortlist, Lawrence charged those who dispute Bailey’s claims with the same sort of deception and denial that is the source of the dispute: “Those who attack Bailey for saying that there are two distinctly different categories of male-to-female transsexuals are similar to those who attacked Copernicus for saying that the earth revolves around the sun: They will not forgive a scientist who promotes a new paradigm that threatens their comfortable illusions” (2004a). In her *Archives* response, Lawrence (2008: 460) continues in this vein, attributing “narcissistic rage, rather than mature, instrumental anger” to the trans backlash against Bailey. Admitting there is “little solid empirical evidence” to support her speculation that autogynephilic transsexuals are especially prone to “narcissistic disorders,” she nevertheless characterizes the “astonishing” response to Bailey’s book as an exhibition of narcissistic rage, that is, as a reaction that typifies narcissists’ responses to “perceived insult or injury” (459, 457). Make no mistake: Lawrence charges Bailey with a careless disregard for transwomen’s sense of self, noting that his depiction of them as “unwomanly ... as untruthful ... as prostitutes or shoplifters ... certainly made the situation no better” (460). But in spite of elucidating this disrespectful depiction that other readers might

assume would elicit a hostile response, Lawrence pathologizes the response as one of “narcissistic rage.” Sadly, Lawrence only calls for more sensitivity toward autogynephilic transsexuals because they already suffer narcissistic wounds, not because Bailey’s stigmatizing accusations are understood to be deeply flawed.

Another level of insensitivity concerns Bailey’s overall perception of transwomen as men. Not only are autogynephilics read as “men trapped in men’s bodies” (Lawrence, cited in Bailey 2003: 168), but they are also said to lack “women’s souls” (Bailey 2003: xii). Even if one agrees with Bailey (as some transwomen do) that transwomen are biologically wired to become who they are, such biological determinism does not make them men, nor does it warrant referring to them in ways that ignore their own self-understandings. Without denying some role for eroticization in the lives of transwomen, Riki Lane (2008: 456) accuses Bailey of sexualizing them in a particularly offensive and reductive way as “sex starved gay men or neurotic straight men with a sexual obsession.”

Finally, Bailey takes no responsibility for the potential harm to the trans community of his negative generalizations about autogynephilia. His praise for Blanchard’s “political incorrectness” that disregards the basic ethical question of the potentially harmful effects one’s research might have on its target group (158) diminishes his credibility as a researcher. One trans respondent summarizes this quite well: “Are transgendered people low socioeconomic liars and shoplifters especially suited for work in the sex trades? Such claims, under the guise of high quality science, engender and maintain the oppression, ostracism, and violence that transgendered people face” (Barres 2008: 429). Indeed, when Bailey admits to Dreger that he no longer hesitates “to say true things out of concern that the truth would cause someone pain” (cited in Dreger 2008a: 417), one has to wonder how anyone could possibly defend his research as meeting even minimal ethical standards.

A second major weakness in Bailey’s understanding of transsexuality is his uncritical embrace of Blanchard’s model, with its production of two categories for Mtfs: “homosexual” or “autogynephilic.” This model is presented as scientific, garnering all the legitimizing force belonging to that claim, and is opposed to what both Bailey and Blanchard refer to as “the feminine essence theory,” which is presented as a flawed personal belief that Mtfs are literally women trapped in men’s bodies (Blanchard 2008: 434). Many respondents criticize Bailey’s recourse to these two models for reasons that go beyond the insensitivity already discussed. The first set of complaints concern Blanchard’s theory itself and the second set concern the false dichotomy it instantiates (Serano 2008: 492).

According to Madeline H. Wyndzen (2003, 2008: 500), the *correlation* Blanchard found between transwomen attracted to men and a reduced likelihood of having sexual fantasies about being a woman has been improperly

extended to a *causal claim* that autogynephilics represent a distinct group of gender dysphorics marked by increased sexual fantasies about being women. Wyndzen and others fault Bailey for adopting this research uncritically, despite convincing arguments that it suffers from several methodological errors (Wyndzen 2003), that it has not been properly replicated (Lane 2008), and that it excludes considerations made by other clinicians and theorists who work with transpersons. John Bancroft (2008: 436) usefully points out that even though Blanchard believes there are two distinct types of transsexuals, he is much more cautious than Bailey, who would elevate this theory to a level of certainty that Blanchard himself would refuse. In Blanchard's contribution to the *Archives* debate, the theory put forward is described as a *hypothesis*, based on his *belief* "that transsexuals' sexual orientations are the best basis for classification" (2008: 436). Moreover, Blanchard admits that the truth value of his two categories is rendered problematic insofar as they involve self-reports and that distinguishing between psychological denial and trustworthy counter-evidence is difficult to gauge (437). It is important to pay attention to the shift in discourse here from Blanchard to Bailey. It is important, not because the original formulation of this theory avoids patronizing or pathologizing its maladapted others, and not because other biological essentialist accounts manage to include the psychosocial, cultural, and subjective factors that others (for example, Bockting 2005) claim we ought to consider. Rather, it is important in effecting a shift from hypothesis to fact, from belief to truth, a shift that legitimizes a particular theory as worthy of scientific status at the expense of other theories.

Julia Serano's (2008) impressive summary enumerates the many reasons why transsexuals (as well as other respondents) refuse not only the autogynephilia theory, but also the false dichotomy Bailey, Blanchard, and Dreger support between it and the "feminine essence model":

Those of us who reject causal theories of autogynephilia typically do so, not because we believe that we are "women trapped in men's bodies," or that sexuality plays no role in our explorations of gender, but because such theories naively conflate sexual orientation with gender expression, gender identity, and sex embodiment in a way that contradicts our personal life experiences and that is inconsistent with the vast diversity of trans women that exist. In fact, most trans critiques of autogynephilia center on the fact that this scientifically unsubstantiated theory forces all women into one of two rigid categories, nonconsensually defines us in ways that contradict our own personal sense of selves, mistakes correlation for causation, handwaves away nonpathological alternative models that better explain the data, unnecessarily sexualizes and delegitimizes our identities, and has the potential to jeopardize our access to sex reassignment and our social and legal status as women. (2008: 492)

Clearly the “feminine essence” model is not the only alternative to the reductive classification of types based on sexual preference. And despite Bailey’s (176) patronizing view that “Blanchard’s ideas have not yet received the widespread attention they deserve, in large part because sex researchers are not as scholarly as they should be and so don’t read the current scientific journals,” some of these other sex researchers respectfully reject Blanchard’s theory in favor of more complicated perspectives. In support of Serano’s claim that trans identities are more complex, Bancroft (2008: 427) affirms “the heterogeneity of their developmental histories” which renders “the interaction between gender identity and sexual orientation ... complex and ill understood.” And Nicols (2008: 477) suggests there is a “dizzying array of histories Bailey can’t even begin to imagine” to be gleaned from reading some of the prominent trans activists. From a social science research perspective, Lane (456) usefully notes the more complex and respectful theories of Ekins and King (2001, 2006), for whom autogynephilia is an overly simple and inadequate concept.

The third weakness I discuss may well represent the most provocative aspect of *TMWWBQ*. It concerns the way that the “provisional and speculative” knowledge of Blanchard’s “scientific” research is elevated to the status of truth, as if science occurs in a moral and political vacuum (Clarkson 2008: 443, Lane 2008: 456, Moser 2008: 475). Most of the trans, and many of the non-trans respondents address this problem in one way or another. Many are surprised at Dreger’s reticence to take Bailey more severely to task for his self-serving promotion of what she claims “doesn’t even rise to the level of *bad science*” (Dreger 2008a: 402). Of course, Dreger’s main concern is to argue against the allegations made about Bailey as a researcher and to locate what is accurate and inaccurate about the controversy, not to discern the value of competing theories of transsexuality. But in her response to the commentaries, Dreger also claims that her “ultimate allegiance is to the truth” (2008b: 507), and that where truth is concerned, “factually problematic” autobiographies take a back seat to scientific accounts (2008b: 505).

It is important to note that other scholars and sex researchers, including non-trans respondents who have no personal investment in the status of personal narratives, do not share Dreger’s allegiance to the truth. Instead they argue that scientific knowledge is precarious, and that it is Bailey’s inability to grasp or to care about the politics involved in his book that has caused the predictable backlash. John H. Gagnon and Lane question Bailey’s use of science to impose his own beliefs on others in the name of truth. Problematizing the concept of truth in science, Gagnon refers to its instabilities especially in the field of sexuality and gender (2008: 445). Like Lane (2008: 455), who claims there is no conclusive evidence to support either Blanchard’s model or the so-called “feminine essence” model, Gagnon faults Bailey for failing to grasp the limits of science and its relation to truth. Chiding Bailey for donning “the

mantel and the political privilege of science to tell the ‘data’ what the real explanation of their condition might be,” Gagnon (2008: 445) alludes to the arrogance of Bailey’s position. He notes that much to Bailey’s dismay, “the ‘data’ in this case decided to fight back” (2008: 446). As other respondents point out, “science is not free of politics” (Moser 2008: 475), especially when it speaks for others in ways that pointedly ignore their views. Drawing on these responses, I have shown that Bailey’s claim to truth not only ignores the views of those it seeks to enlighten; it also dismisses their dissent as pathological denial or irrational rage.

Making claims for the truth of one’s belief that transwomen are motivated by sexual paraphilia is not only unwarranted due to an “inadequate research base” (Lane 2008: 456), it is also politically dangerous for those who seek access to transitions. Here Bailey’s theoretical absolutism (Mathy 2008: 462) represents its own, arguably biased beliefs as scientific truth and omits any ethical consideration of the impact of such claims on transwomen (admissions of erotic cross-dressing might disqualify one from access to surgery, as Gagnon [2008], Lane [2008], and Moser [2008] all point out). As Trish Salah (2009: 440) notes, “the real political stakes of the circulation of Bailey’s book are made more complex by the recent announcement by the American Psychiatric Association that the working group on revisions to the *DSM-IV*, in the areas of sexuality and gender, will be headed by Kenneth Zucker.” Zucker will work with Blanchard in a group to revise “Gender Identity Disorder” undoubtedly based on some version of the scientific model whose truth is being championed here by Bailey.

In my view the more reasonable counter-claim to Bailey’s scientific truth-telling is not the elevation of personal accounts of feminine essence to the status of truth, nor the claim that transwomen never engage in erotic cross-dressing, but the recognition that both positions express competing claims that are based on the perspective and the knowledge of their proponents. As Gagnon (2008: 447) puts it, “Neither explanation is true in some universal sense. No human conversation is free of the time and place in history and culture in which it occurs; this includes whatever activity that is called science in any time and place.” In the face of Dreger’s conviction that allegiance to the truth will somehow resolve the problem of competing beliefs, Gagnon’s clarification comes as a useful reminder of the limits to science, truth, and knowledge. Bailey’s claim that the backlash has taught him “the value of truth” (cited in Dreger 2008: 417) and his resolve to tell it even if it causes others pain serve only to reinforce the insensitivities that belong to the man who would be king.

The Lesson of David Reimer: Beyond the Nurture/Nature Debate

Like most of us lesser mortals, David Reimer wanted to be recognized for who he believed himself to be. But what is the basis for claiming to know who one is, especially when one's claims contradict what biological discourses hold to be "natural" and what psychiatric and/or social discourses hold to be "normal?" If nature alone dictates gender identity, then what is the role of the subject in relation to it? Those discourses that locate differences of gender or sexual identity in nature may intend to avoid the pathologizing categorizations Bailey employs, but as my previous discussion has demonstrated, nature can also be read as an evolutionary mistake in need of correction. So-called "failures of nature" can also be used to justify imposing sex reassignment on children who are intersexed, ignoring their experience of self and world. The literature on the intersexed demonstrates that when nature fails to produce normatively defined, appropriate genitalia, medical experts apply judgments about genital appearance to literally impose what they deem the most "practical" sex (Dreger 1998, Holmes 2008, Kessler 1998). Intersexed activists argue that their personal decisions to live as women or men ought to trump claims to nature and to the normative, even if some intersexed persons attribute those decisions, reductively, to a question of natural preference. What concerns me here is that in attributing natural causes to gender identity in either "normative" or "nonnormative" subjects, the subjective and symbolic agencies involved in constituting identity are ignored. The appeal to natural diversity is peculiarly dehumanizing in this sense. If nature makes me who I am, then there is nothing I can do about it (the usual, if problematic, argument for tolerance toward sex and gender minorities)—and the subject is reduced to an object.¹⁶

Of course, one popular response to the reduction of gender diversity to nature is to similarly reduce it to "culture," and then to imbue rational, self-determining subjects with the ability to choose who they are. This voluntarist view is more seductive, in part because individuals do make decisions about gender and about whether or not to change sex. It is also appealing because it emphasizes the will of the individual, celebrating those who cross normative gender boundaries as outlaws of an oppressive social regime, or at least as agents who consciously choose their own location within it. At the extreme edge of this discourse, evident in the "treatment" of the intersexed, is the medical conviction that one can *impose* a gender on subjects because it is culture, not nature that is decisive. My reading of the case of David Reimer proposes

16 I realize that the more recent redeployments of "nature" are intended to be liberatory. For an extended critique of appeals to nature and a useful defense of social construction in the context of trans theories, see Salamon (2006).

an alternative to the dehumanizing effects of both the biological determinist response and the cultural determinist response as they play out in this case.

A brief summary will suffice to outline the salient events that drew so much attention to this infamous case. In 1966 David's penis was burnt off by accident at the age of eight months by a doctor performing a routine circumcision. John Money, who took charge of David's treatment, used the case to argue that nurture can take precedence over nature in the formation of gender identity if sex reassignment begins early enough. Therefore, two months before his second birthday, David underwent surgery to castrate him and to create "normal" looking female genitals. John Money's experiment to prove psychosexual neutrality in young children became an obvious failure after David's decision (at 14 years of age) to live as a man. However, the failure was apparent to David, to his family, and to some of his local psychiatrists years earlier due to David's consistent masculine identification, his unease in his reassigned identity as "Brenda," and his occasional attempts at suicide.

Because Money's "experiment" was a dismal failure, the case provided fertile ground for arguments that nature, not nurture, determines gender identity. Before making his identity known, David authorized publication of his story as the case of John/Joan (Colapinto 1999). He was subsequently convinced by journalist John Colapinto to go public with his life story, which resulted in Colapinto's (2000) book, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*, the title of which highlights Colapinto's perspective. David had agreed to reveal his identity in the book and on subsequent popular television talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (2000) on the grounds that others would benefit from hearing about his negative experience with the medical practice of reassigning the sex of children with atypical or damaged genitals. On the advice of John Money, David was reassigned as female, like most intersexed infants whose penises are deemed inadequate. Although it may seem that the failure to bring about a feminine identification in David and his subsequent decision to live as a man provide good arguments for the power of biological forces to shape one's gender identity, as Colapinto believes, I will suggest that even in this case, things are not so straightforward.

In a moving discussion of the Reimer case written just before David's death in the spring of 2004, Judith Butler (2004) wonders whether it is possible to "do justice" to him. Most of David's thoughts that both Butler and I wish to honor are mediated through others; they appear in fragments of interviews or psychological assessments, or both, and are often couched in theoretical contexts of someone else's choosing. Although this case has been used most frequently to make arguments for or against both biological and cultural determinism, as Butler notes, her own account "neither affirms nor denies" (67) either theory. Rather, her aim is to demonstrate how David's life can be read as challenging the "discourse of intelligibility that would decide his fate" (74). Her

account is compelling insofar as David manages to resist the constraints of a normalizing medical and psychiatric regime. He never embraces the feminine identity he is assigned, he refuses to cooperate with and eventually even to visit John Money, he maintains a “secret” sense of himself as a masculine subject throughout his childhood, and he insists on genital reconstruction surgery as a teen to enable a more comfortable reclamation of his masculinity. Moreover, as Butler (2004: 72) points out, he insists that the measure of his worth is not dependent on the status of his genitals: “what will justify his worth will be the invocation of an ‘I’ which is not reducible to the compatibility of his anatomy with the norm.” Astutely, Butler observes that David’s worth is based instead on “a certain conviction he has about his own lovability” (73), that he will love and be loved for who he is. Attentive to what David says about his own feelings with respect to the femininity demanded of him throughout his childhood and early adolescence, Butler makes him a kind of Foucauldian hero, an example of a person’s capacity to resist “the grid of intelligibility by which his own humanness is both questioned and asserted” (67).

I agree with Butler that David’s life can be read as a site where debates about intersexuality and transsexuality get played out and where his resistance to the disciplinary regimes imposed on him may be admired.¹⁷ But such a reading does not depart significantly from the nature or nurture framework except to demonstrate that socialization alone does not determine one’s identity. Butler’s reading does little to challenge the case made by John Colapinto, that *nature makes us who we are*, and that David “had reverted to the sex written in his genes and chromosomes” (Colapinto 2000: xiv). Even though she clearly does not share Colapinto’s view, and states that David’s story does not supply evidence for it (Butler 2004: 66), her own reading does little to contest it. Butler’s eloquent insistence that there are things we simply cannot know about David’s experience is true to a certain point, especially given the mediated accounts available to us. But given the dual misconceptions that either David’s gender can be culturally determined (Money) or that his resistance to the cultural imposition of femininity can be attributed to nature (Colapinto), it seems worthwhile to venture an alternative theoretical account. This strikes me as especially pertinent since David’s story has been popularly construed as providing an ironclad case for the biological determinist view of gender, which also risks becoming an argument *against* transsexing. From the bioreductionist perspective, David’s assertion that he was lovable as a man and that he would love as a man with or without a penis is simply attributed to his ineradicable nature. From a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, I offer a way to understand David’s struggle as

17 Butler writes: “This body becomes a point of reference for a narrative that is not about this body, but which seizes upon the body, as it were, in order to inaugurate a narrative that interrogates the limits of the conceivably human” (2004: 64).

something other than a simple injunction of nature, which also has the merit of suggesting something other than an inexplicable spirit of rebellion against a regime of enforced sex/gender identity.

Lacanian theory and practice develops a specifically analytic discourse to account for human subjects as embodied beings who are also speaking beings. In so doing, it departs from predominant discourses of science and social science that favor some form of physical or cultural determinism. Lacan differentiates this psychoanalytic discourse from scientific discourses, arguing that the former provides a more complex understanding of human subjects as embodied, but also as thinking and desiring beings. For him, reducing human activity to what humans may share with other animals, most commonly the rat, is an illicit reduction of psychical to physical phenomenon that ignores what is specific to humans. Where the rat is identified with its body in order to know what it can learn or be taught to do, knowledge of human psychical activity can never be so reduced. Thus Lacan describes psychical activity as a “hybrid chain ... made of fate and inertia, throws of the dice and astonishment, false successes and missed encounters, and which makes up the usual script of a human life” (2006: 130). His conception of the subject as “a being whose being is always elsewhere” (1998: 142) complicates what we can know about ourselves and others. For Lacan, that elsewhere includes the body, “enigmatic affects,” experiences about which we may not want any knowledge, as well as fantasies, desires, and drives that are inaccessible to us (1998: 139).

Here we are already at some remove from the rat! We are also confronted with a refusal to pit mind against body. For Lacan, the split is rather in the subject herself, between the “me” that is constructed through images and signifiers and what escapes signifiers, meanings, and consciousness: fantasies, objects of desire, drives, and the repressed. Psyche and soma are mutually constitutive, and even when the body is said to “ground” one’s being, that body always partakes of more than one dimension (1998: 110). In the analytic discourse Lacan develops, we have a conceptual linking of subject, body, and unconscious as “homologous structures” which can only be thought together in terms of the dimensions he calls Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (Verhaeghe 2001: 130). Not reducible to nature or culture, these dimensions implicate both nature and culture insofar as we are embodied beings, speaking beings, and members of communities through which our experience of ourselves as embodied subjects is mediated.

In analytic discourse, the body is conceived not only in terms of the image with which we identify in the dimension of the Imaginary, but also in terms of a Symbolic dimension (where the body bears meanings inscribed on it by others) and in terms of the Real dimension that concerns the inaccessible if incessant drive and its objects. Here there is no mind/body split, but an “integration of a psychical relation into the organism ... [that is] both unknown to the subject

and as essential as his body to him” (Lacan 2006: 148–9). Never simply an effect of the hormones or DNA to which some scientific discourses attempt to reduce it, the body in psychoanalytic discourse must be thought across these dimensions.¹⁸

The Real dimension of our experience is what Freud calls the primal repressed. Lacanians refer to it as “that part of the drive that cannot be represented” and that “causes an inner split in the subject” between those parts of me I can know and those that remain foreign, even while they insist (Verhaeghe 2001: 127, 109). In the dimension of the Real the psychosomatic drives are said to “symbolize ... [and] incorporate the functions of the organs in which ... natural exchanges appear—that is, the oral, anal, and genito-urinary orifices” (Lacan 2006: 121). Here the body’s natural functions are libidinally invested with a surplus of pleasure, albeit in relation to what is inscribed upon it by the Other (Verhaeghe 2001: 68). The Real dimension also concerns the objects of pleasure or anxiety that are linked to the drive but which remain inaccessible to consciousness. Lacan writes, “I speak with my body and I do so unbeknownst to myself. Thus I always say more than I know” (1998: 119). Analytic discourse is a way to pay attention to this “more,” to what gets repeated but not signified, to the objects that cause desire to function, to “letters” that are inscribed on one’s body but escape meaning: to what Lacan calls the “*jouissance*” of the body. What makes the body as libidinal organism or drive a “foreign body” is the “inscription on the body of something it enjoys” (Verhaeghe 2001: 113). Linked to the death drive and traumatic loss, *jouissance* implies a pleasure, but one that is “incomprehensible ... experienced traumatically by the subject who cannot handle it in its usual symbolic way” (Verhaeghe 2001: 125). Freud (1953) refers to this “*jouissance*” as a form of enjoyment “beyond the pleasure principle” that makes itself known through repetition but not through words. The dimension of the Real therefore “appears” in what gets repeated in dreams, slips, and symptoms. In Lacan’s cryptic formulation, it is “what doesn’t stop ... being written,” what persists elsewhere (1998: 59).

The Imaginary dimension refers to any capture of the subject by an image that is always an impossible consolidation of one’s being. This dimension refers back to an identification formed between six to eighteen months of age with an image of self as bodily form. Lacan’s “mirror stage” describes a process through which the infant can anticipate an ideal unity of self by identifying with the image of its body as whole, coherent, and unified. This image of

18 “Isn’t it plain to see that the soul is nothing other than the supposed identicalness ... of this body to everything people think in order to explain it? ... When it is assumed to think concretely, there are concretions. When it is assumed to think information, there are hormones. And still further, it gives itself over ... to DNA” (Lacan 1998: 110).

“me” is supported by the gaze of the other, but the subject also identifies with the other who represents a unified image. For Lacan, the body image is an exterior image that symbolizes “mental permanence” and produces “effects” on the body (2006: 76–7). The place of the other may be occupied by another infant or sibling with whom one identifies and toward whom one expresses the inevitable aggression of the not-yet-consolidated subject who projects her own frustrations on the other.

The effect of this moment in one’s history is to establish an investment in the bodily sense of self as unity or identity that is based on misrecognition, and on the repression of one’s experience as split, fragmented, and dependent. For Lacan this process results in “the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark [one’s] entire mental development with its rigid structure” (Lacan 2006: 78). Primary narcissism refers to the libidinal investment in this misrecognition that negates lack or loss, enslaving one to the image of wholeness, the illusion of autonomy and mastery. Interestingly, Lacan suggests it is love that must always “untie anew” the “knot of imaginary servitude” that characterizes this moment in the formation of the ego (2006: 80). One cannot love another without giving up the illusion that nothing is missing. On the other hand, the narcissistic, self-loving ego clings, with what Lacan calls “mad passion,” to this image of self, defending it against others and rendering “other” what does not support it—including of course other parts of one’s own experience (2006: 95). In this manner, narcissism is tied up with frustration and aggression is directed toward either self or others unless or until one manages to come to terms with one’s own inner division between wholeness and lack, coherence and incoherence, self-reliance and dependence on others.

Narcissism plays a role as well in the sublimation of love/hate that “resolves” the Oedipus complex through an “identificatory reshaping of the subject” (Lacan 2006: 95). In this symbolic dimension, as in the other two, bodily development cannot be read as a naturally determined process. Here it is symbolically determined as an effect of the demands and desire of the (m)Other who attends to the infant’s physical needs. The Lacanian version of Oedipus, like Freud’s, is therefore grounded in the erotically charged relation of the child to the (m)Other where “loss and the processing of this loss is central” (Verhaeghe 2001: 79). Indeed, for Verhaeghe the infamous “castration anxiety” constitutes a “*secondary* elaboration of a more primary anxiety,” which is the traumatic fear of being overwhelmed by the (m)Other (15). If the (m)Other’s desire does not refer to someone or something beyond the child (whether a father, a lover, or some other passion), then the child is reduced to an object of her desire. For Lacan, the “phallus” is what is *imagined* to be lacking in the (m)Other (by the child) and the signification of

that lack is key to the emergence of the subject.¹⁹ The interpretation of loss in terms of castration during the Oedipus complex is a phallic interpretation that defends against the loss through the assumption of signifiers of gender: “It is during this process that the body is constructed, the body that we have (not the body that we are), clothed in a gender identity that is always secondary” (Verhaeghe 2001: 132). Far from being biologically determined, in this discourse masculinity and femininity are psychosexual positions one takes up. Verhaeghe states these are positions “chosen by the subject towards the structurally determined lack” (61n23). Adopting one of these positions, then, is not a heteronormative requirement that complies with either nature or culture, but an “*imperative of inscription*” for defending against an otherwise overwhelming loss (Shepherdson 2000: 88).²⁰ This brings me to a final point concerning the Lacanian theory of the embodied and gendered subject.

Even though the signifiers for masculinity and femininity are attributed by the Other (that is, by parents, culture, law, designations of sex), it is a matter of unconscious yet subjective choice whether one adopts the symbolic position of having the object of desire (phallus) or of being the object that causes the other’s desire. From this perspective, there are only signifiers for male and

19 On the potential for maternal desire to be overwhelming, Bruce Fink (1995: 56–7) cites Lacan’s rather humorous passage as follows:

Her desire is not something you can bear easily, as if it were a matter of indifference to you. It always leads to problems. The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the mother’s desire.

So I tried to explain that there was something reassuring ... There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap and which holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller which protects you, should the jaws suddenly close.

I thank Lorraine Markotic for drawing my attention to this passage (personal communication). For a sympathetic interpretation of Lacan that questions the adoption of the phallus as primary signifier of lack, see Dean (2000).

20 Shepherdson distinguishes between the “imperative” of sexually marked embodiment and the contingency of gender in order to emphasize the “structural inevitability of representation that characterizes human sexuality in all its diversity—indeed, as the very condition for the possibility of this diversity, which would otherwise be reduced to the ‘natural diversity’ discussed by evolutionary theory, in which the symbolic order is eliminated” (2000: 88). For Laplanche (2007: 202), the duality of sex represses the plurality of gender to produce the “unconscious residue” of sexuality which is also repressed because it is multiple, polymorphous, and forbidden. He suggests the emphasis on gender identity today is a response to its repression by an ideological and rigid adherence to duality, and that sexuality is what is created and repressed in the process (202).

female, and “the human being has always to learn from scratch from the Other what he has to do, as man or as woman” (Lacan 1981: 204). According to Jean Laplanche (2007: 205–6), this learning implies there can never be a “core gender identity” or any simple process of “imprinting” of gender onto a body. Moreover, he insists it is important to recognize the “complex set of acts” that make up gender assignment and that are written on the child by its parents, siblings, and others well before any definitive assumption of signifiers occurs (213). If we are to follow Laplanche here, it is not an unmediated subjective preference for a given response to lack that is at stake, but a response to the conscious and unconscious wishes of the parents, including the prescriptive messages that surround one (215). Clearly these “messages” play a significant, though not determining role in the constitution of any identity, complicating our desires for recognition and our demands for love.

Shifting the terms of discussion from nature and from individual will to subjectivity and desire enables a more concrete analysis of the Reimer case. It allows us to ask what might have been going on in David’s psychic life that culminated in the fatal repetition of previous attempts at suicide. David’s struggle to love and be loved as a masculine subject was clearly fraught with difficulty from a very early age, especially since he had to contend with two traumas—an internal and an external trauma. According to Verhaeghe (2001: 49–63), an internal or structural trauma is inevitable for all human beings, given that our own drives are too much, cannot be fully represented, and threaten to overwhelm us. Internal traumas produce conflict as well as the fantasies we construct to defend against that conflict. External or accidental traumas, on the other hand, involve something that “did not have to happen,” and “will inevitably come into interaction with the structural trauma caused by the subject’s own drive” (55, 58). In both cases, fantasies are produced in an effort to cope with the drive. But the addition of an accidental trauma to the unavoidable structural one has two other effects as well. The accidental trauma gets written on the body to produce a symptom, and the conflict it causes is more easily projected onto others (58). This process enables the subject to avoid its own psychical implication in the effects of the trauma; in particular, to avoid the guilt and anxiety that are tied up in the symptom.

For David, the usual oedipal confrontation with symbolic castration was complicated by the previous accidental trauma surrounding the loss of his penis and compromised, perhaps fatally, by the failure of others to tell him the truth. In my reading of this case, it is not simply the loss of his penis, but the response of others to that loss, that is wounding. Let us imagine that for David, as for other infants at the mirror stage, there is a narcissistic investment in the image of the body as whole and complete, an image that rests on the negation of lack, fragmentation, and dependence. In David’s case, one might assume this image is reinforced not only by his parents, but also by having a twin brother.

The messages coming from the parents and from others would be tied to their beliefs about masculinity. Like his brother, David is assigned a male sex and, if we are to follow Laplanche here, these messages are inscribed even before their meaning is grasped.

It is useful to keep in mind that David was nearly two years old when he was surgically castrated and then treated like a daughter. Nothing suggests that he adopts a feminine position in the resolution of oedipal conflict where a secondary identification with what Lacan calls the “ideal type” of one’s sex occurs. For example, David’s brother Brian recalls in an interview that “there was nothing feminine about Brenda” in terms of her posture, appearance, interests, and behavior (Colapinto 2000: 57). David claims that he always knew there was something different about his status as a girl: “everyone is telling you that you’re a girl. But you say to yourself, I don’t *feel* like a girl. I liked to do guy stuff” (Colapinto 2000: 62). David’s persistent, normatively masculine desires include comparisons with his twin brother as the *same* even when he is badgered into “seeing” their difference. At one point when Money is trying to convince David, *qua* “Brenda,” of his anatomical *difference* from his brother, David protests in a nicely mirrored formula: “But we’re twins. We’re twins” (85). Even Money was compelled to admit that David probably had some memory of being seen as a boy by others: “I rather strongly suspect that Brenda already knows that she once had a penis and probably that she had been considered [sic] a boy” (cited in Colapinto 2000: 136). Consistently locating David as an object in this discourse, Money does not entertain the thought that David might have considered *himself* a boy, albeit a mutilated one, or that he might have had some relation as a subject to the question of his own sexed embodiment. Even when his body is altered by castration, by female hormones, and by the coercive imposition of feminine appearance and social status, David continues to feel he is male. Clearly Money is unable to imagine the recalcitrance of David’s relation to his masculinity, or his libidinal investment in it. Instead, Money believes that whatever memory David might possess can be eradicated by a consistent process of socialization to femininity, a process David will call “brainwashing” (cited in Colapinto 2000: xii, 262).

From the Lacanian perspective I have described, the question of sexual identity concerns having or not having the phallus (or signifier of desire) after the desire to be the object of the (m)Other’s desire is repressed. Desire functions when something is missing, and while the feminine position is about being or not being the object of desire, the masculine position is about having or not having the object of desire. Both positions rest on a sacrifice and both symbolize a loss or a limit to an otherwise unlimited *jouissance* which threatens to overwhelm the subject. For Lacan, castration refers to the sacrifice of *jouissance*, a sacrifice that regulates desire and enables one to pursue fantasized objects; that is, it enables one to desire. Defending his desire, David justifies his

rejection of attempts to feminize him, and insists that his masculine identity is not dependent on physical anatomy or on the cultural ideals of masculinity that require possessing a penis:

It just seems that they implied that you're nothing if your penis is gone. The second you lose *that*, you're nothing, and they've got to do surgery and hormones to turn you into something. Like you're a zero. It's like your whole personality, everything about you is directed—all pinpointed—toward what's between the legs. And to me, that's ignorant ... If a woman lost her breasts, do you turn her into a guy? To make her feel "whole and complete?" (cited in Colapinto 2000: 262)

Insisting that he will love and be loved with or without a penis, David shows that desire functions symbolically and independently of anatomical sex.

Ironically, David's masculinity was continually confirmed precisely through the constant efforts on the part of medical experts and his parents to undermine it.²¹ These efforts centered on the question of having or not having the penis—a metonymy for the loss of the phallus that characterizes the castration complex. And for the psychoanalytic theory I have been describing, this question of having or not having the phallus marks the masculine encounter with sexual difference. The repetition of this question structures David's subjective experience of the world, including his identity and his ability to love, all of which undermine the attempts to assign a feminine position. But the accidental trauma that penis loss creates, accompanied by the discursive repetition of the drama of castration via attempts to feminize him, arguably intensifies the castration anxiety David must defend against. Lacking any explanation for the existence of "unusual" genitals that prompted the routine, invasive, medical scrutiny of both his body and his thoughts about gender and sexuality, David's fantasy was "that my mother had beaten me between the legs" (158). This fantasy of castration accounts for the difference David perceives but cannot name: "You get the idea that *something* happened to you ... but you don't know what—and you don't want to know" (79-80). Knowing and not-knowing are manifested in David's partial compliance with others' expectations, while feeling all the while "like a robot" (148).

David's fantasy reveals that the accidental trauma interacts with the structural trauma of loss as the fantasy of castration has a Real dimension that affects the body and that causes internal conflict. While David attempts to elaborate a subjective position for himself using the images and signifiers of masculinity that surround him (the usual defense against loss), this attempt is repeatedly

21 I thank Larry Lyons for making this point and helping me to clarify it (personal communication).

thwarted by others. In addition, this thwarting not only takes the form of betrayal by secrecy, but also of repeatedly raising the question of castration. Understandably, David defends himself against this constant reminder of loss not only in the typical neurotic fashion of “hid[ing] the castration he denies,” but also in conflating the structural trauma with the accidental one (Lacan 2006: 700). The internal conflict involving guilt and anxiety that accompany the castration complex in any subject is projected onto others who inflict the accidental wound: the doctors and those who strive to cover up the accident by lying to David.

When he is 12 years old, David tells one of his slightly more trusted psychologists that he has a secret, something he should not discuss, and indeed cannot discuss (Colapinto: 123). The sad truth that nobody dares reveal to him is that he *is* the family secret. From the age of 22 months, David is made into an object of secrecy by his parents, his doctors, and school officials. He is literally surrounded by a conspiracy of silence and false information about his past, and subjected to the exhortation to adopt stereotypically feminine activities and preferences, as well as to the hormonal regulation of his body. Not surprisingly, David reports feeling “like a trapped animal,” not a human being (cited in Diamond and Sigmundson 1997: 301). Refusing to acquiesce to the position of *object* of secrecy to which he is assigned; David becomes a *subject* with a secret. That David is a subject, a masculine subject, is what he must be secretive about. This secret is not something he consciously knows and deliberately withholds from others. It is a question of holding onto a feeling that no one else is willing to hear him speak about, let alone acknowledge. David describes in various accounts the consistent failure of his doctors to listen to him, doctors who “didn’t want to hear what I had to say but wanted to tell me how I should feel” (Diamond and Sigmundson 1997: 301). When David is finally told the truth about his history, his first question is not about the medical procedure or the decision to approve it, but about whether his masculine identity was once supported by his parents. David asks, “What ... was my name?” (Colapinto 2000: 180). The name that has been unspoken for 12 years reveals the hidden truth that he had once been called something else, that his original, proper name signified a masculine subject.

What would it have cost to tell David the truth as a child: the destruction of Money’s experiment or the distress of his parents who now had one son without a penis? Certainly his parents were easily led to believe that without a penis David’s life would be a disaster, even though they wanted the best for their son. But for 12 years, David was dragged off to specialists, subjected to humiliating questions and sexual scenarios, and passed among a team of psychologists, all in the name of getting him to conform to what others decided was best for him. What would David’s experience have been if they had told

him the truth? Would he still have made suicide attempts as an adolescent? What if the numerous psychologists were working instead to listen to David's fears and concerns about his differently configured genitals instead of going along with the program of willful deception? This is a story not only of David's struggle against those he trusted, but of how he survived a childhood in which he had to feign an identity that was so clearly foreign to him.

David's story ends with suicide in 2004 reportedly after suffering a financial loss (Smith 2004). But financial loss is unlikely to be the only reason given David's history. In childhood he loses his penis, his identity as brother to an identical twin, his privacy, his physical and social integrity, and the trust of his parents. In adulthood he loses his wife (due to separation), his brother (who commits suicide), and his financial security (due to an unscrupulous boss). Given this relentless series of losses, and previous attempts to kill himself, how should we read this final loss of life? Is it a triumphant reclaiming of his integrity, or a tragic inability to cope with one more betrayal? Either way, two things can be learned from David's life. First, to impose a gender on others according to a cultural norm about the proper relationship between gender and the body is a form of violation. Second, to assume that David's resistance to this imposition is simply based on natural disposition is an oversimplification that ignores his existence as a subject. Unlearned, these lessons occlude what is at stake in this case: that a child cannot be treated like an object with no conscious or unconscious intentions, and that one cannot be fit into a way of living contrary to one's experience, identity, and libidinal investments. Perhaps we can best honor David by making sense of the life he made available to us, and by applying its lessons to the struggles of others in ways that respect what he had to teach.

Conclusion: From Simple to Complex Bodies

In the field of gender and sexuality studies, we do not have simple truths, but contested theories concerning the contributions of biology, of socialization, and of psychic experience in the constitution of the subject. While challenging the cultural determinist view that gender can be imposed, or that infants are psychosexually neutral, the failure of Money's experiment to impose femininity on David Reimer does not prove his gender is simply given by nature. With Butler, I have argued that the sociopolitical dimension played an important role in Reimer's life, exerting a disciplinary power he was able to resist. But I have also provided evidence for Tim Dean's (2000: 67) point that retrieving the body from naturalizing or psychologizing views does not justify reducing it to the "purely sociopolitical," that there is a psychological dimension of embodiment

which also merits our consideration.²² If the body we have is not synonymous with the body we are (Verhaeghe 2001: 100), and the “ego is never reducible to [one’s] lived identity” (Lacan 2006: 93), then there is something else at stake that cannot be addressed in discourses of natural or cultural determinism, or in those that emphasize individual will.

My psychoanalytic reading engages a theory of embodiment that enables not only a specific analysis of this particular case, but also a way to appreciate the complexities of other identities. Transsexual lives attest to the human potential to assume and to inhabit a gender contrary to birth sex and normative assignment, suggesting that embodiment involves a psychological marking of the body with effects to which one must respond. From the perspective of an analytic discourse, the bioreductive discourses that relegate such marking to some physiological or genetic determination have no concept of how human beings confront the question of sexual difference, and no way to appreciate the radical idiosyncrasy of sexuality or the recalcitrance of the drives. These scientific discourses are disturbingly dehumanizing, normalizing, and potentially pathologizing. By contrast, Verhaeghe states: “there is no final correct answer to the real of the drive ... The major difference between a ‘normal’ and a ‘pathological’ answer resides in the social endorsement of this answer” (2001: 62). From an analytic perspective, when confronted with a subject tormented by an idiosyncratic or unlivable answer, the point is not to negate or to pathologize that answer, but to enable “the subject to take another position towards this drive” (Verhaeghe 2001: 62), a position that can be more comfortably inhabited whether or not it is socially endorsed by others. This discourse proposes an ethical solution to human suffering not through demanding social conformity but through creating the potential for choosing how to deal with the ineradicable drives that inhabit us and that shape our lives.²³

One of the aims of this chapter was to challenge reductive explanations for sex and gender diversity, especially as those explanations have the potential to

22 Consideration for this dimension is not an effect of some depoliticizing tendency on my part, as Bernice Hausman (2001: 475–6) suggests in critiquing an earlier formulation of these views. Nor is it simply “wrong,” as Gayle Salamon (2002: 144) states in her curious misreading of the theoretical position advanced by Roen and me (Elliot and Roen: 1998), to suggest that bodies are consciously and unconsciously invested with meaning, and not reducible to thing-like status. For her more promising psychoanalytic view of the body as a “complicated apparatus,” see Salamon (2004, 2006).

23 Those transsexuals whose solutions depend on social endorsement because they seek medical intervention clearly find themselves in a more difficult situation. I do not imply that all decisions are equally supported or easily achieved. In my view, the potential for choosing, however constrained by existing social values and institutions, must be supported or analysis becomes a tool for normalizing individuals.

negatively impact trans people or other non-normative subjects. Richard Ekins and Dave King (2001, 2006) suggest that all transgendered identities must be understood with reference to “three sets of interrelations. These interrelations are those between (1) sex (the body), sexuality (erotic and sensuous response) and gender ... (2) ‘scientific,’ sub-cultural and lay conceptualisations and theorisations ... of transgendering phenomena; and (3) self, identity and social worlds” (2001: 4). Isolating just one factor, such as sexual preference, or claiming that either natural or cultural factors *determine* the relations between all the other elements, is to reduce a complex reality to a simple one. Targeting the persistent cultural preference for natural causes, I have argued that this perspective is inadequate for grasping the complexity of *any* identity, including trans identities. As Kinsman and Lancaster demonstrate, even when strategically chosen to promote acceptance, bioreductionist theories carry the potential to do more harm than good and risk creating a class of people who may be regarded as lesser human beings. Theories rooted in nature appeal to the recognition of some biological foundation for gender and for sexual desire, even though these theories cannot account for obvious changes in sexual preference or decisions to live as one gender instead of another. Moreover, they risk being tautological: if whatever exists may be called an effect of nature, then nature does not really determine anything in particular (or determines everything). I have also suggested with reference to David Reimer that interpretations that privilege individual resistance to social forces tend to overlook other aspects of psychic life, including unconscious investments in masculinity and femininity. I have drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis to provide a more concrete analysis of the multiple dimensions that render David, like the rest of us, complex. This analysis furthers our understanding of how human subjects are constituted as embodied and social beings, however precariously and diversely, and always in relation to others.

Conclusion

Fielding Contested Desires

The overall aim of this book is to critically engage with contested sites in the field of transgender theory as it interacts with feminist and queer theory. I have argued that examining the multiple and various ways in which these complex bodies of knowledge encounter, challenge, and inform each other entails confronting the rifts that mark those encounters as difficult. While one might wish to relegate all the divisive issues to the past, where one reviewer suggested some of them belong, doing so would create an idealized and harmonious image of the present, overlooking the tensions and conflicts that make this terrain a contested one. Whether the conceptual and political impasses explored here will persist is hard to predict as they shift over time, opening and closing in response to their mutual impact, to historical events and legal developments, to social change forged by activists, and to transformations in thinking that occur due to ongoing debate. In engaging these debates my intention is not to exacerbate the schisms that already exist and I hope my approach will not appear to have this effect. Nor do I presume to propose any definitive remedy to the dilemmas they pose. I share Noble's (2006a: 19) view that "our *inability* to resolve [the tensions] rather than our erasure of the conflict constitute the critical possibilities of feminist scholarship rather than its failure." What I have shown is how attending to responses to these rifts, however partial or provisional, helps us to create a map of *some* of the differences and divisions between and among trans, queer, and non-trans feminist theorists. Acknowledging the complex relationships that exist is an important contribution not only to knowledge—up to and including what it means to be human—but also to informing our interactions with each other.

In analyzing these often fraught relationships, I hoped to elucidate what might be at stake for those who stand at any given moment in solidarity with, or in opposition to others. With reference to academic discussions of trans, Talia Bettcher and Ann Garry (2009: 6) note that "the sheer work of understanding can sometimes be a political intervention." For me, the work of clarifying the political and theoretical issues in these debates was initially motivated by a desire to challenge what I perceived to be hateful, patronizing, or mistaken views about transsexuals held by many non-trans feminist academics in the predominantly white, middle-class culture in which I am located. This soon became a complex task, not only because I had a great deal to learn, but also because I had a few things to unlearn, such as the widely shared non-trans feminist prejudice against

the surgical modification of sex. In order to argue persuasively within non-trans feminist communities for valuing the gender diversity that exists, I also had to learn what those differences meant according to those engaged in their description and theorization. Exploring these differences led to a discovery of their internal heterogeneity and of intense political as well as personal struggles for recognition that are often divisive. Such struggles are divisive not only due to those differences of sexuality, race, and class that complicate the apparent homogeneity of *any* broad identity category in ways we need to know more about.¹ They are also divisive because there are goals, desires, and visions that are often (and perhaps inevitably) incompatible.

Over the last few years, some readers and interlocutors have questioned my emphasis on competing visions and have read my attempt to *clarify* how these visions are often construed and experienced in non-dialogical and oppositional ways as an attempt to *reproduce* unnecessary binaries. One reader interpreted my unwillingness to endorse all of her views not only as a failure to grasp what was at stake in her position, but also as an unequivocal alignment with an opposing position. What I learned from this reader can be read as an answer to the others: that these debates do take place on a sort of battlefield, that real lives are at stake, and that sometimes gains for one “side” do indeed come at the expense of the other.

I believe one could produce a list of the different ways in which gender identity and embodiment are experienced and understood that would be at least as extensive as the list Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990: 25–6) has produced around sexuality. While the respect for differences promoted by Sedgwick and myself does not imply the production of binary oppositions, it does require the ethical principles of granting persons the authority to describe and name their own experiences of gender, and the avoidance of subordinating some perceptions to others.² For example, in acknowledging disrespectful criticism directed at each other by genderqueers and transsexuals, Michelle O’Brien (2003: 10) notes that “it is transphobic, wrong, unethical and politically divisive to push forward a critique that dismisses the very real needs of many transsexuals.” Locating herself as feminist, genderqueer, and transsexual, O’Brien demonstrates the futility of keeping these categories discreet. Contrary to the perception of my first reviewer, I do not endorse using them as “shorthands” for exclusive political

1 As Stryker (2006a:15) points out with reference to the current field of trans studies, there is a need for more contributions by trans people of color and working-class transpersons as their perspectives are under-represented in the literature. My reflections on the debates are necessarily partial and I make no claim that they represent the field as a whole.

2 Bettcher (2009) discusses the issue of first-person authority with respect to trans persons.

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positions (although we need to discuss theorists who do). Acknowledging their overlap, however, does not in itself mend the rifts I have described, nor does it preclude taking a stance when one position deliberately or unwittingly erases another. On this issue I agree with both my reader and with O'Brien (2003: 11) who claims that "there is a profound and pervasive need to envision a politics not rooted in gender variant people competing over rights and dignity that are perceived to be scarce and earned at other's expense." But insofar as some goals and visions are promoted at the expense of others, or can be shown to have that effect, the antagonisms between and among those who identify either exclusively or inclusively (and variously) as feminist, queer, transgender or transsexual, will not be easily dissipated.

I am heartened by Mirha-Soleil Ross's view that allies are those who must "decide where they will stand in the debates" even though they may very well be accused of "transphobia" by some trans people (cited in Namaste 2005: 97). While I have endeavored to examine competing claims, agendas, and goals across a series of rifts in an effort to understand the differences they address, I have also remained critical of those moments where differences are undermined, mocked, or otherwise refused. In the first two rifts I opposed the radical feminist denial of transwomen's self-descriptions and the erection of hierarchies among transgender and transsexual persons on the grounds that both are political positions that preclude the respect for differences to which all parties are otherwise committed. In the third and fourth rifts I intervened in the construction of *either/or* positions that are arguably based on untenable oppositions, whether or not hierarchies are the inevitable result. Instead, I suggested that we value *both* intelligibility *and* unintelligibility, *both* similarities *and* differences. The final chapter addressed an enduring theoretical and political debate that seeks to ground difference in *either* nature *or* culture—a debate that is not attached to any particular group, but that has implications for the appreciation of differences in general, including those of gender identity and embodiment. I argued that adding psychic complexity to our conceptual tools necessitates contending with internal desires forged in relation to external desires and cultural demands, all of which mean that the diversity of embodied subjects is *neither* simply given (by nature) *nor* simply produced (by culture).

I want to return here to the question of solidarity which has been haunting my text from the outset, and which deserves to be explicitly addressed. In the context of feminist, queer, and trans debates I have been particularly impressed with Cressida Heyes' (2007, 2009) disarming arguments that we are all targets of normalization, and that all forms of body modification threaten to create docile bodies—or at least demand careful reflection on our participation in them. Emphasizing the similarities between transsexuals' use of surgery and non-trans women's use of dieting or cosmetic surgeries to create slim or idealized bodies enables her to challenge and diffuse the disparaging views with

which some non-trans feminists hope to set these groups apart. Heyes' internal critique of these feminist views is inspiring, yet in the final analysis there are several problems with her emphasis on analogy that deserve a response.

Heyes' theory runs the risk of condemning transsexuals, dieters, and cosmetic surgery recipients for failing to resist normalizing regimes such that "the possibility of openness to self-creation—to thinking oneself differently than the norm predicts—is foreclosed" (2007: 119). However strategic it is intended to be, her focus on similarities necessarily elides some important differences between those who use surgery and those who do not, as well as differences among those who use surgery. For example, what if transsexuals understand themselves not as those who seek the internalized ideals of their (chosen) sex, but as those who hope to acquire a sexed embodiment that may otherwise be missing?³ Furthermore, what if Heyes' (2007: 119) emphasis on similarities among body modifiers cannot avoid privileging

the transgendered person who struggles to live on the edge of gender ... refusing to accede to the demand to make aesthetic choices line up with behavioral norms, with emotional stereotypes, with sexual partners ... [and who] is potentially creating spaces for all gendered persons to experiment with new ways of being?

From my perspective, the promotion of solidarity has to be based on a refusal of the oppositional categories of either sameness or radical alterity that Heyes poses when she asks "what investments do cisgendered people like me have in treating transsexuality either as 'just like' some other phenomenon we think we understand or as exceptional—unlike anything we might recognize?" (2009: 137).⁴ As Julie A. Nelson (1992) points out in another context, solidarity requires the recognition of similarities, not sameness. But it must also be based on a recognition and respect for differences. As I have argued in Chapter 3 along with Sullivan (2006) and Shildrick (2002), our encounters with (un)becoming others must contend with the specificity of diverse forms of self-transformation beyond whatever analogies we may also wish to consider. For Shildrick and for me, ethics is not about adjudicating whose analytic practices or self constructions

3 Stryker (1994: 250), for example, claims to be standing "between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence." Her poignant questions—"Could I say which one was worse? Or could I only say which one I felt could best be survived?"—bear witness to the specific difficulty of transsexual experience.

4 The term "cisgendered" is relatively recent, and refers to those whose experience of their gender corresponds to that assigned at birth. The prefix "cis" means the same as, whereas "trans" implies a crossing. Given the current controversy over this term, I prefer to use the term "non-trans" instead.

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are open to “self-creation,” as Heyes would have it, but “about creating openings in and through the uncertainty of strange encounters” (Shildrick 2002: 7). There is clearly a political and rhetorical value to Heyes’ emphasis on similarities. But when this emphasis threatens to reduce those similarities to sameness, or when the differences that my analysis explores are relegated to the exceptional, the unrecognizable, or the unintelligible, then something vital is lost.

Despite her theoretical reliance on Foucault, Heyes’ third and possibly most vexing problem is created by the decision to judge whether some acts of becoming or self-creation are better than others. By “better,” she implies better able than other forms of self-transformation to challenge corporeal normalization through engaging in practices of self-care or “somaesthetic” practices of “creative self-fashioning” (Shusterman, cited in Heyes 2007: 123). Resistance to cultural ideals is difficult to assess, Heyes admits, because establishing definitive alternative practices would impose yet another set of normative ideals (2007: 118). Nevertheless, challenging normalization becomes synonymous in her work with a specifically queer desire to challenge what might easily be interpreted as transsexual desires:

feminist solidarity in an age of gender diversity cannot be premised on clearly bounded dichotomous subjectivities; instead, solidarity emerges from shared political goals that include the objective of challenging those identities themselves. Most important for the kind of queer community I have in mind is to gather together people who, in defying normalization, are open to the possibility of becoming something new and unanticipated. (2007: 123)

My concern here is that instead of furthering her own goal of solidarity with diversely sexed and gendered others, Heyes privileges a particular sort of desire as well as specific configurations of gender and embodiment in ways that recall the debate between transsexual and transgender queer theorists on “transgressive exceptionalism” (Halberstam 2005: 20). I therefore return to Wiegman (2006) and her internal critique of queer as a way to work through some of these recalcitrant yet familiar tensions.

In a riveting critical analysis of her *own* queer assumptions, Wiegman discovers she was mistaken to value queer identities for their move away from gender or for their supposedly unique transitive potential. After examining the queer reading of heteronormative gender as intransitive (that is, fixed, given) and as “other” to be repudiated, Wiegman concludes that this reading actually prevents one from recognizing the transitive property of heteronormative gender. That is, in requiring an intransigent heteronormative gender as a consistent object of critique, queer theory entrenches the fantasy that femininity belongs naturally to women and masculinity to men, if only to oppose it (95). Natural or constructed, when read as always already given, the heteronormative desire

for gender is granted a power it does not deserve, the power to claim its desire for gender congruity as natural and universal, not as the result of a particular process of becoming: “Whatever fixity it seems to achieve in the processes of normalization does not render it intransitive; such fixity merely identifies normalization as one mechanism for delivering the phantasm that masculinity, for instance, is somehow *not made* referentially male, and vice versa” (95).

What Wiegman discovers, much to her own surprise, is that gender is “constitutively, inherently, transitive,” an activity of becoming (95). According to her, queer theory, and by extension, transgender theory, is therefore not unique in understanding gender as a process of becoming or “(un)becoming” (Sullivan 2006), nor is it lacking the desire for gender itself.⁵ What queer theory desires is an oppositional relation to normative identities (read as given), whereas transsexual desires often aim to *achieve* the stability or the “bounded subjectivities” that Heyes contests and that heteronormative genders take for granted. But Wiegman (96) learns from her attentive reading of trans studies’ arguments with queer, particularly from its “refusal to forward queer theory as a critically or culturally inclusive norm, and its criticism of calling every alignment of sex and gender heteronormative,” that something else is at stake:

if a FTM who dates women cannot be called heteronormative in any, well, heteronormative sense, and if the whole emergent archive of trans studies seeks a rethinking of the terrain of gender transitivity and embodied sex, what was the bar that separated heterosexuality, if not heteronormativity, from sharing in the desire for gender transitivity itself? (96)

The conclusion Wiegman (96) draws is that there is a desire for gender in all positions, not that some are mired in gender categories that others escape: “why *not* read heteronormativity as well as heterosexuality as implicated in a broader, if contradictory, social and psychic desire for gender, a desire animated by profound, incommensurate, and proliferating investments in the look and feel, language and symbolics, mutability and achieved stability of gender?” Indeed, Wiegman shows how queer identity is achieved, problematically, through a process of repudiation or abjection that must preserve heteronormative gender as its constitutive outside. What she persuasively demonstrates is the operation of desire in *all* forms of embodiment and in all political projects, including those that imagine they are queering, ending, or transcending gender. Whether it is for

5 Michael O’Rourke’s (2005) theorization of the “queer-straight” aims to untie the association of heteroeroticism with the desire for heteronormativity, and thus arguably contributes to undermining what Stryker (2004: 214) takes to be a queer emphasis “on sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity.”

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or against normative configurations, for or against stability and coherence, the desire for gender is ubiquitous:

It manifests itself anytime that gender is pursued, whether with passion or aggression, for social discipline or sexual pleasure, or for analytic or personal explanation. By locating the desire for gender everywhere—in analytic practices and subject construction, in sex acts and erotic circulations, in identity formation and in both norms and norm-making processes—I want now to say yes. Yes to gender ... as a means to describe, inhabit, embody, critique, violate, and resist. (97)

If Wiegman is correct, then there is little point in hoping to end or escape either gender or the rifts that are created in theorizing forms of trans embodiment because “*any* pursuit of gender is a complex instance of the work of political desire” (98). Instead, we need a better understanding of the different ways in which gender is embodied, one capable of recognizing that the different ways we theorize it are based on our fantasies of what it means and what it might enable us to imagine or to do. If we accept Wiegman’s view that meanings of gender are infused with our own desire and fantasy of what changes can be accomplished through our own understanding of it (99), then making sense of gender in terms of compliance or defiance, intelligibility or unintelligibility is inevitably invested with political desires as well (97). Moreover, the critical and creative potential of trans, queer, and feminist studies should not *depend* on repudiating the conceptualization of gender elsewhere, in “heteronormativity” or in each other’s formulations, experience, and desires. Such dependence, Wiegman (100) suggests, would make repudiation of an allegedly radical other “the act that instantiates our political hope.” The major implication of Wiegman’s analysis for my purposes is this: that ethical resistance to the oppressive imposition or abjection of unwanted genders does not simply belong to *particular* bodies or theories (queer or otherwise), but inheres in the recognition that disparate experiences of embodiment include divergent desires for gender that need to be recognized. Taken together, these desires evoke the diversity we collectively embody and mark the complexity we discover in the contested sites they inhabit.



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