



Seeking Gender (In)Difference

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Trans/Forming Knowledge: The Implications of Transgender
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Intro

When George asked me to come to speak to you today I was flattered to be asked and very pleased to have the opportunity. When he told me who else was coming I was even more honoured. And I want to thank all of you for joining us here today to make this day a success.

What I'm going to do with my time is to try to provide some context for the ensuing discussion. I'm going to do this by talking a bit about how it is that I am here today telling you a few stories using my own perspectives as a way into some of the larger questions. I hope to be able to convince you that the interests of gendered and sexual minorities have always been intertwined and that this will only become more so in the future.

Who's Who?

When I talk about transgender issues I like to start with a short primer on what I mean when I use certain terms. I like to define terms like sex, gender, man, woman, intersexed, and transgender. I like to problematize those terms and also words like gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer because we generally use these words assuming that everyone means more or less the same things by them. Today we're here to discuss how the coming out of transgender people, the movements for transgender rights, and the theories generated by all of that energy have had an impact on feminism and on LGBTQ ideas and activities. Seeing as that is the reason why we've all come together here today, I'd like to assume that these words, and the concepts that they are meant to convey, have already become problematized for you.

Now, although we may engage in debates among ourselves about exactly who transgender people are and whether or not transgender folks belong among women or in sexual minority communities, make no mistake about it, those who would deny us our rights have very clear opinions about who's who. They know in their hearts that real men aren't sissies and real women aren't dykes. They know what makes a man a man and a woman a woman. And they know that anyone who strays from their clear formula needs to be at least marginalized, if not fixed, punished, or locked away.

From their perspective, even those among us who look and act most conventionally, still have some fatal flaws that need to be corrected or eradicated. To people who see the world in these kinds of black and white terms, there's really not much difference between being a threat because

you're gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or a feminist and being a threat to the moral order because you're transgender.

However, many gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers and feminists would balk at being considered to be not much different from transgender folks just because what we all have in common is being a bit different from the norm.

At the same time, there are many ways that the people who claim these identities overlap. Many lesbian-, gay-, bisexual-, queer-, and feminist-identified people also readily identify themselves as transgender. In fact is quite common that people who later come to call themselves transgender sojourn for a part of their lives in feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer communities before they come to know themselves as transgender. And there is a small, but far from negligible, number of people who only come to identify themselves as feminists, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, or queers after they begin to live their lives as transgender people.

Furthermore, in recent centuries, the kind of people who have been most consistently singled out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer and (to a lesser degree) as feminists in western societies have most often been those people who have been the most obviously transgender. The most feminine of men have epitomized homosexuality and the most masculine of women have been targeted as feminists and lesbians, whether or not they themselves so identified. Thus the people who have most defined homosexuality and, to a lesser extent, feminism have most frequently been those among us who have been the most gender transgressive. This may be an image that many in gay-pride and lesbian-feminist movements have worked hard to dispel, but the fact remains that, in the minds of most people, homosexuality, bisexuality and feminism continue to be strongly associated with unconventionally- and cross-gendered behavior.

Thus, like it or not, one of the things that creates alliances among us is our enemies who lump us together. Among ourselves, we have very good reasons to make the kinds of distinctions that are lost on others, and we should, and will, continue to do so. As we do, though, it is also important for us to remain cognizant of all the meaningful ways that our multiple identities and subject positions intersect, and sometimes collide, with one another and with each others'. Undeniably, this is one of the places that we have experienced the most conflict and learned the most in the process of trying to theorize how the questions raised by transgender people fit in with the issues of concern to feminists and other people thinking hard about sexuality and gender. How we identify, and what identities others attribute to us, have become contentious as they have, in many ways, become the pivotal

credentials which permit credibility, access, and authoritative voice within our internal debates.

Who Am I?

Having said all of that, I feel that it behooves me to make my own subject position clear to you. As is to be expected, it includes a few intersections of different identities and roles which serve me differently in varying circumstances. I'll start with the most public portion of who I am.

On first glance you will see before you a middle-aged, middle-class, white man, born in America and immigrated to Canada in 1969. A brief introductory conversation will quickly uncover that I am straight, married, a step-father, and a grandfather. You will learn that I am a Dean responsible for all graduate programs, graduate students, and associated staff and faculty at a mid-sized Canadian university with about 18,000 students. This is my first, most public layer. It is the information that I feel comfortable making available in most contexts because in most public places in which I find myself this is a powerful subject position which affords me many privileges.

In some contexts, I might also feel safe to say that I am a past-president of my local synagogue and that I am active in a Jewish religious community. This information I am more careful about disclosing. There are many anti-Semites in the world today. There are many people who think poorly of the rationality of *anyone* who is religious. There are many people who take such information as an invitation to initiate accusatory diatribes on the politics of the Middle East. Fortunately there are also those who find this information salutary and afford me greater respect on account of it.

Were you to only know this much about me, you might wonder what I am doing here today. Some of you might wonder what authority I have to speak, what knowledge I might be drawing upon? Some of you might doubt that I could have sufficient authentic knowledge to be authoritative. Some might consider that my class, race, religiosity, gender, and sexuality would disqualify me from a place on this particular podium.

To counter such objections I might tell you that I am a scholar of gender & sexuality. I am a Fellow of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, known around the world for my work of the last 20 years on transgender issues, feminist and LGBTQ concerns. And, although I might reasonably explain my interests with a call to dispassionate curiosity-driven scientific research, for those of you who are critically concerned about issues of identity, this might not provide you with much reassurance. How could someone so "*not one of us*" ever hope to get it right? Even many people who

are not particularly concerned with such identity issues and who know only this much about me find themselves wondering why a straight middle-class white guy would want to study such topics. Am I a closeted homosexual? A secret cross-dresser? Am I some kind of voyeuristic pervert sexually titillated by other people's sexual lives and exploiting my access to provide a thrill to myself and to my readers?

On the one hand, the research work that I do would seem more legitimate to most people were it to be based more in self-interest. However, that same self-interest would also lay me open to accusations of being biased, of having a political agenda, of lacking objectivity, and to being discredited for being a member of a stigmatized group. Credibility to research, speak, and write with authority to audiences made up of members of the groups being studied often requires some level of in-group affiliation. Credibility to research, speak, and write with authority to audiences made up of non-members of the groups being studied usually requires sufficient distance and perspective to provide an appearance of "objectivity".

So, at this point in the conversation I am faced with a fork in the road. I can stay the course and run the risk of being thought an exploitative pervert by some people, or a highly accomplished, if somewhat quirky, researcher by others. Down the other fork in the road is more self-disclosure. Self-disclosure which rapidly becomes very one-sided, that feels highly personal (even though the information is available all over the Internet), and which often prompts voyeuristic intrusions into intimate details of my own life.

Some days I take one fork, others days I take the other. Sometimes, I just steer the conversation away from my research altogether so that I am not faced with having to make sense of what I do by making myself the object of intense curiosity (on the good days), or by purchasing feminist and LGBTQ legitimacy at the cost of my more normative legitimacy, possibly to the point of personal endangerment. Here, today, it is my hope that I can walk you through how it is that I can speak with some authority and some legitimacy about feminism and LGBTQ issues and also retain my credibility as a researcher and my integrity as a man. In the process I hope to illustrate some of the issues we are here to discuss today.

The Other Fork and the Road to Here

I'm a trans man. I was born female. I grew up as a girl and as a tomboy. In the mid-1960s I realized that I loved women and went looking for lesbians. That was before Stonewall and it was before gays and lesbians were talking much about pride. For most gay people, the 1960's were times overshadowed by shame, ostracism, and all manner of socially-sanctioned

abuse. I was young. I was living in the suburbs with my parents. I was underage. I was scared. I knew others who had been put in mental hospitals and given shock treatments for lesser offences. I was closeted. We pretty much all were, but we found each other anyway.

In the spring of 1969, I was at a gay bar in New York with my older lover and an effeminate gay man friend of hers. I was underage for being gay (jailbait for my girlfriend) and I was underage for drinking. I left my ID in the car thinking that if there was trouble I'd be better off not being identified and having my parents get a call telling them where I was and what I was up to. My girlfriend was dancing with our gay friend when all of a sudden all the lights glared on and a harsh male voice shouted "Nobody move! This is a raid!" It was the summer of Stonewall in New York and we were caught earlier on in the same sweep that ignited the Stonewall rebellion. Only, this time, we all just froze as we were told to do and the cops started roughing people up and dragging them away to the waiting paddy wagon. I was terrified as I waited my turn and the police photographer kept snapping my picture. Finally, they came to us. I lied about my name and age. I told them I lived in Canada and gave a phony address there. They knew I was lying, but they took pity on me and eventually let me go noting that at least I was with the only man and woman in the club who had actually been dancing together. Later that summer I fled to Canada.

With my arrival in Canada I sought out and became active in the fledgling feminist, gay, and lesbian-feminist movements of Toronto. For the next five years I was involved in many of the earliest activities of these movements in Canada. I marched, shouted, and sang. I worked to organize meetings, actions, and conferences. I helped to build new organizations and services. I gave public speeches in university classrooms, and talks in church basements. I mentored others. I spoke to the media. The communal house I lived in was an unofficial drop-in centre for lesbian-feminists. It was a heady time. Everything seemed possible. We could change the world. But there were some bumps in the road.

In gay and lesbian politics, gay men were still acting like sexist men, so gender became a dividing line there. In feminist politics, straight women were embarrassed to be associated with lesbians, so sexuality became a dividing line there. Class became an issue. Race became an issue. Age became an issue. We splintered. For a while I became a separatist lesbian-feminist who didn't trust either men or straight women.

I moved west, got a bit older, and mellowed some. In the 1980s, I became a graduate student researcher and taught Women's Studies. My first solo

teaching job was in a men's federal penitentiary teaching WS100 to murderers, drug dealers, and thieves. From there I went on to teach WS100 to women on campus, and to men convicted of rape and pedophilia. I learned a lot about gender and sexuality, especially from the men, and wrote about it from a feminist perspective.

In 1989 my first book, ***Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality***, came out. That book was an exploration of issues of central concern to my own life at the time. I had become increasingly masculine over the years to the point where I was often seen to be a man when out in public. I thought that I was just doing the feminist thing of rejecting sexist expectations about what women should look like. Others just thought that I looked like a man. I needed to know what was going on. I found that it happened to lots of other people too (of both sexes) and I wrote about our experiences. The word transgender hadn't reached me yet and was not yet used by other than a very small group of gender variant people associated with Virginia Prince. I called us gender blenders because we inseparably blended the two genders together in one person. Now I think that most people like that would call themselves transgender. Then, mostly we thought of ourselves as women who didn't want to be feminine, and couldn't understand why others couldn't understand.

I was just starting out as a scholar. I idealistically thought that the world of scholarship was different from the world of identity politics. In some ways it was. In some ways it was not. Trying to appear as an objective scholar and also trying not to ruin my fledgling career by branding myself as a "freak" so early on, I didn't talk about myself at all in the book. As a result, people made their own assumptions about where I was coming from. I'll never forget one particularly scathing review of the book in a prominent feminist periodical. The reviewer assumed that I was a straight woman who could not possibly understand gender blending females and so had no right to say anything critical of them. After that, few dared to say anything positive about my book in feminist print for a long time. People still read it. Sales continued (It's still in print 17 years later). I got fan mail from around the world. And I learned an important lesson about identity politics.

For many people, if they can't see who you are, not only won't they listen to you, they'll do what they can to make sure that no one else will listen to you either. Identity politics, played out this way, can stifle important and valuable voices when the correct credentials are not available for scrutiny. Fortunately, I was able to reach people who were not bound by these rules, and my work spoke to their truth. Not everyone has the resources that I had that enabled me to get through these barriers. From my perspective, I

would say that we have lost, and continue to lose, much wisdom and leadership when we spend more time looking at the packaging than at what people have to say.

Through the 1990s I taught the sociology of gender and sexuality and continued my research. By this time I was specifically studying transgenderism. Near the end of the 1990s, I published ***FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society***. The response to this book was also full of lessons for me. When I had started the research, trans men were largely a hidden population. There were very few and very small organizations, very little communication (the Internet hadn't really hit yet), no conferences, only one (despised) scholarly book, very little literature of any kind. My interest in telling their stories was warmly welcomed. Finally someone wanted to know!

It was a big book (720 pages). It took close to ten years to bring out. By the time it came out things had changed considerably. Trans men had found their own voices. They were organized and networked. They were on the net, on TV, writing their own books, holding conferences, being professionals, educating their peers. Many of those who were at the forefront of this work were veterans of feminism, LGB organizing, and lesbian-separatism.

They brought with them some of the habits of identity politics that they had learned there. By the time my book came out, some trans men vociferously took the stance that any one who was not one of them could not, and should not, attempt to speak about their lives. To them, it didn't matter that most of the book was based directly on interviews with 45 trans men, or that a sizable minority of the text was made up of direct quotes from those interviews. What mattered to them was that I had proclaimed myself to be a masculine lesbian and a feminist in the introduction (having learned from the last time that I should make my identification and subject position known). I specifically said that I was not a trans man. That meant that once again I got loudly and publicly denounced as unqualified and offensive for writing such a book. Once again the book sold well among those more concerned with seeing their truth in print than with political correctness. My history seemed to be repeating itself.

Imagine my surprise, imagine my dilemma, when a few years later I realized that the research and writing of that book was also a journey into myself. Early in the 2000s, reluctantly accompanied by national news coverage, I transitioned from female to male. Around the same time, I became a dean and lost most of my research time to my administrative duties. Now I speak to you as a person with a bifurcated life and an interesting history. I am that white middle-aged middle-class man with an excellent job and some

measure of power over other people's lives. I am also a person who viscerally knows what it feels like to be a member of the female half of humanity and all that entails, and who knows what it feels like to be stigmatized for my ethnicity, for my sexuality, and for my gender identity. I live with the knowledge that others like me are routinely murdered for simply being who they are.

Most of the time, I live an extremely straight life. I do senior management work. I spend as much time as I can with my grandchildren. I am religiously observant. Interspersed with this is my work as a researcher and as role model and advisor to transgender people and their loved ones in my home community and in cyberspace. Mostly my straight life and my transgender life exist comfortably side-by-side with very little cross-over.

My own story, I think, provides a window onto what I think are some of the important ways that the presence of transgender people affects feminist and sexual-minority communities. Both of these communities are identity-based. In both feminist and LGBTQ organizing, those who stand to benefit most from these efforts are, in the first instance, identified on the basis of their sex and gender. I'll discuss feminism first.

Feminism

One of the basic postulates of feminism has been that one's biology should not determine one's life--simplistically stated in the old slogan "biology is not destiny." Hidden in this well-worn slogan were the assumptions that sex and gender are the same thing and that once one has been born female (male), one will naturally be first a girl (boy) and then a woman (man). On a very broad level, what feminism has been agitating for is that women and men should have the freedom to choose from the entire range of human possibilities and not be restricted only to what is socially sanctioned for their sex/gender. Theoretically, this has been fruitfully approached by positing genders as contextualized performances into which people invest their identities so that they may be culturally intelligible to others with whom they interact.

Another foundational postulate of feminism has been in noting that nothing is too personal to have a political meaning. Everything is available for scrutiny and analysis no matter how private. Everything has a dimension of power associated with it that is part of the larger politics of determining who gets to run the world. Within these contexts, feminists have found good reason to celebrate those who transgress the usual gender-role expectations. Within limits, women, and sometimes others, who break the gender mold, and challenge gender norms, have been held up as feminist pioneers to be lauded and emulated. transgender people who too

obviously or too radically transgress gender norms have not always been so warmly welcomed or lauded by feminists.

The recent obvious and pervasive presence of transgender people in society (although we have always been here) has caused many people to question and rethink many of the assumptions with which they were previously comfortable. Obviously, transgender people demonstrate that both sex and gender can change. More transgender people change their gender than their sex, some change both. Some transgender people change their gender only once, some change it more frequently. Some transgender people change their gender from one normative gender to the other, some prefer to be more flexible and more creative, claiming innovative gender positions for themselves. Moreover transgender people may also choose to change some parts of their anatomy and not others. And on top of that, what counts as a sex or gender change will vary from person to person, and from one legal jurisdiction to another. And among those who change their sex, none can change in every way that we use to measure biological sex. For instance, no one is yet able to change human sex chromosomes or create transsexed reproductive capacity.

If gender and sex can change, if gender and sex need not match each other in the usual ways, if types of genders and sexes are proliferating, if there are no firm and definitive markers of either sex or gender, what happens to the postulates and goals of feminism? The issue of what transgender people can, should, and actually do with their bodies has become a political issue for feminists. Huge battles have raged over what access transgender people should have to feminist activities and services. Heated debates have transpired over the political correctness of changing one's sex or gender. Feminism claims that biology is not destiny, that the personal is political, and that gender is a mandatory and life-defining learned social performance. Are female-born people who change their sex/gender abandoning their responsibilities to be gender pioneers? Are male-born people who change sex/gender simply extending their male power by invading some of the few spheres of influence that women have been able to carve out for themselves?

How are feminists to know who has the qualifications of membership if sex and gender are not stable? It's hard enough to sort out what to make of those people who make as complete sex/gender changes as they can. Some feminists have argued that femaleness is a birthright--one must be born with the right credentials, they cannot be crafted. Others have been more willing to accept those who make full sex and gender changes and who,

having done so, have come to a visceral understanding (rage?) about their loss of male privilege. But what about those who have no stable or permanent commitment to any sex or gender?

It is even more challenging to know how to understand those transgender people who prefer not to choose a normative gender or sex. Such transgender lives would seem to be the ultimate demonstration of feminist principles. They would appear to explode the idea that sex determines gender, they would seem to embody the social constructedness of gender. The personal lives of such people certainly seem to have been politicized by most with whom they come into contact. Yet, many feminists have been deeply suspicious of people of indeterminate sex and gender. From within a polarized world view it is vitally important to know who is on which side. To many feminists, transgender people can seem like double agents, infiltrators, or defectors. At the very least, they force open simple sex/gender-based "us" and "them" dichotomies.

LGBQ Communities

Sexuality-based communities have also faced some significant challenges in sorting out how they relate to transgender people. Certainly, transgender people have always been present in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer communities. Within certain bounds, LGBQ transgender people have even, at times, been celebrated as LGBQ icons. Transgender people have also been among the most visible members of LGBQ communities, bearing the brunt of hostilities both from those outsiders who condemn sexual variation, and from those within LGB (and to a lesser extent within queer) communities who are embarrassed by obvious gender transgressiveness and fearful of the ire that they feel it brings upon all members of sexual minority communities.

The rights-seeking movements that have grown up for LGBQ people over the past several decades in North America have been, like feminism, identity based. Underlying sexuality-based identities are sex and gender identities. To identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and to a lesser extent, queer, individuals and their partners must have sex and gender identities to use in their self-definitions.

Further complicating things is the reality that many transgender people also change their sexual identities when they change their sex/gender, and some do not. This is an issue that can be confusing for many people who are neither transgender themselves, nor close to transgender folks. To help with this confusion, some people prefer to use what they see as more accurate, albeit slightly more awkward, terms such as androphilic and gynephilic,

meaning attracted to men and attracted to women. Thus, we can say that gay men and straight women are both androphilic, whereas lesbians and straight men are both gynephilic. Some transgender people maintain their androphilic or gynephilic attractions when they change sex/gender, others do not. And, because some transgender people never clearly change sex/gender completely, and some transgender people go back and forth through two or more genders over various periods of time, how then do we understand a person who, for example, has male genitals, looks and acts like a woman, has breasts, and is attracted to men? Does this person belong in the LGBQ community? What's the right pronoun to use?

In addition to the questions about membership in LGBQ communities associated with destabilized sex/gender identities, transgender people sometimes push on another hot button for many LGBQ people. Historically, lesbian and gay men have been thought of in very similar terms as we now use to define transsexuals. Lesbians were thought to be women who wanted to be men, and gay men were thought to have women's souls trapped in men's bodies. Clearly, public opinion has mostly moved on since then, but some of the power of these images remains with us, and there are those in LGBQ communities who desire to suppress any evidence that there might still be some truth to it.

The reality is that many transgender people *do*, as I did, sojourn for varying periods of time in LGBQ communities, with or without yet identifying as transgender. Thus, it is actually *true* that some who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer really do wish that they were another sex/gender. That wish may remain hidden and un-acted upon. That wish may become demonstrated through their actions and dress while still remaining LGBQ. That wish may translate into some form of sex/gender change which may, or may not take them out of LGBQ communities. Thus, it really is true that some LGBQ people are transgender, or do want to change sex, just as it is equally as true that many LGBQ people are just plain folks who just happen to love someone of their own sex.

It's Gone the Other Way Too

Feminism and LGBQ ideas and politics have also had a significant influence in how transgender people have understood and organized themselves. Although transgender people have been around as long as everyone else has, and although transgender people have been organizing themselves for as long as the second wave of feminism and the modern LGBQ rights movements, large-scale transgender consciousness, theorizing, and political activism have come later.

Transgender people have often drawn heavily on the theorizing, experiences, and successes of feminist and LGBTQ activists. Indeed, many transgender activists and theorists were themselves leaders in those communities and have brought their skills (and some of their bad habits too!) with them to transgender political and theoretical work. So much so that, in recent years, we have seen a joining of forces among feminist and LGBTQ (now T) organizations on many issues which are now understood to be of mutual concern. Ultimately, freedom of choice concerning gender and sexuality are feminist and LGBTQ issues as well as those of transgender people, and all of our leading organizations and theorists have come to see and embrace this.

Summing Up and Looking to the Future

Transgender subjectivities are remarkably varied. Some transgender people do their best to disappear into the woodwork and become as straight as they can be. Others are as out there, as original, and as obvious about their gender non-conformity as they can be. In between, transgender people span the entire spectrum of gender expression and bodily configurations. Whatever transgender people make look or act like, our very existence requires a radical rethinking of the meaning of sexuality- and gender-based identities and all that goes with them.

We now know very well that people's sexes and genders can and do change. We now know that there are more than two possibilities for each, and that some people may never settle permanently into a stable and easily recognizable sex or gender. Furthermore, we have come to realize that there can be no easy assumptions about what kind of body a person might have underneath their gender presentation, or what kind of gender identity someone might have to go with a particular type of body. For those of us who have been around transgender people, and have thought about what we can learn from that experience, the usual markers of sex, gender, and sexuality have become unreliable tools. We have been forced to find newer, more nuanced, and more complex ways to understand categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. As we do so, we are also beginning to ask more probing questions about how we grant authenticity, authority, and voice. How do we decide with whom to align ourselves? How do we determine who our allies are? On what basis do we attribute identities to others? How do we determine our own identities?

Ultimately, I believe that variability in gender expressions and bodily configurations will continue to proliferate. We will see, and learn to accept, many more genders and sexes than we do now. We will expand our

capacities to accommodate gender uncertainties and individual gender variabilities. I do not believe that we will lose the bedrock of the two sexes and genders to which we are accustomed, but rather that we will witness the building of an intricately complex and multi-hued structure upon that foundation. As we do so, the kinds of discriminations that we now make based on sex and gender differences will become less and less meaningful as they become harder and harder to ground in any kind of unambiguous indicators. I suspect that, over time, the social change wrought by transgenderism will be as significant as has been brought about by feminism and the coming out of LGBTQ people.

Feminism and LGBTQ activists and theorists have taught us to see the myriad ways in which sex and gender make a difference. The coming out, theorizing, and activism of transgender people and their allies may well bring us to a time when there are so many genders and sexes that sex and gender become useless as tools by which to divide humanity.

Today we look for understanding, sympathy, human rights, tolerance and acceptance for women and gender and sexual minorities. As my friend and colleague, the Russian sexologist Igor Kon, so rightly pointed out to me, as long as we look for this kind of largess from those who hold power we are not truly integrated into society. When sex, gender, and sexuality have become matters of social indifference, only then will we have set aside a social structure built upon gender and sex differences. Only then will we have claimed our rightful places in society.