

# Look! No, Don't!

## The Visibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men

JAMISON GREEN

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JAMISON GREEN, ONE OF THE FOREMOST FTM TRANSSEXUAL ACTIVISTS in the United States since the early 1990s, writes here of the doubly ironic "visibility dilemma" experienced by many transsexual men. Transsexual experience becomes invisible, he claims, in direct proportion to the success of appearing to others as a member of one's subjectively experienced gender; conversely, to the extent that one reveals a transsexual life course to others, one risks undermining the achieved gender status.

Most transsexuals, like most other people, wish to be seen as belonging to the sex or gender to which they considered themselves to belong. This is why they suffer the risks, pain, and social stigma of transitioning. Historically, this desire has been the basis for decisions by many transsexuals to remain silent about their past lives in other genders. But as a new wave of transgender activism took root in the 1990s, activists such as Green felt compelled to be visible publicly as "out and proud" transsexuals. Borrowing a concept from the gay liberation movement, Green argues that the "closet" induces a heavy burden on transsexual people, and is itself supported by the very social conventions that lead to prejudice and discrimination.

Green describes how "out" transsexuals experience more "gender policing," (i.e., expressed judgments of the acceptability or authenticity of the transsexual's identity). But he also notes that the more congruent transsexuals' identities and bodies become through the process of transition, the less interesting they tend to become to the public, and the less illustrative their lives are of the diversity of gender experience—and therefore the more difficult it becomes for them to remain effectively "out." Green concludes that despite the ironies, transsexual visibility is crucial to expanding general awareness of the great range of difference contained within social norms of gendered embodiment.

Transsexual people usually wish to be perceived and taken seriously as members of the gender class in which they feel most comfortable. Transsexual men are able to integrate into mainstream society through employment and social relationships; their natural masculinity (enough by itself in many cases), combined with the external effects of testosterone, renders them virtually undetectable in most social situations. Cultural tolerance for a wide variety of adult male 'looks' (appearance styles) and behaviours is also a factor in the success of many transitional men. Billy Tipton is just one modern example of a transgendered person who was accepted as a man among his peers without benefit of hormones or surgery. But what happens to the transsexual man who 'comes out' and admits to having been born female?

Many of us have been 'outed' because of unfortunate medical situations or indiscreet friends or family members. A few of us have been used as grist for the insatiable media mill as we have fought to retain employment in places where we originally represented ourselves as female, or have been sued

by disgruntled ex-spouses. And some of us have chosen to make ourselves visible as FTMs—men who were born with female bodies, not ‘women who became men’—because we have realized that the isolation individual men like ourselves experience can lead to poor self-esteem and ill-informed choices with respect to treatment in medical, legal and social arenas.

I am one of the growing cadre of men who have chosen to make ourselves available to assist transsexual and non-transsexual people in understanding the experience of transsexual men. I have inched my way out of the transsexual closet with considerable trepidation, and many people in my life have no idea of my transitional past because I choose not to disclose it to them. I have found that when a man elects to reveal his transsexual history or status, results are mixed, varying according to situation—but generally the experience has struck me as being somewhat like joining another species.

I started doing educational work regarding gender and transgender issues in 1989 at the request of Steve Dain and Lou Sullivan, both of whom were too busy (and, in Sullivan’s case, too ill) to continue to do some of the college and university classroom lectures and question-and-answer sessions they had been doing regularly for several years. There was no remuneration for these sessions, which would last an hour or sometimes two, and with travel time could often take three or four hours. I soon realized that taking time away from my employer to give classroom lectures meant that I was actually losing money in the service of education. In other words; we sometimes pay for the privilege of telling our stories. Sullivan also referred me to a speaker’s bureau operated by a large San Francisco transvestite club, through which I participated in numerous panel presentations for classes in which the professor wished to clarify the difference between transvestites and transsexual people. Through these panels I learned that these presentations can be a valuable form of therapy. It can be worth every penny it costs to receive the validation I feel when I am sincerely thanked for sharing my personal story, especially when the exchange has proven enlightening for even one person in the audience. And yet, as I listen to each panel of cross-dressers, transgenderists and transsexual people reciting our oh-so-similar litanies of struggle and change, there seems to be a self-centeredness, even a pathetic quality of self-justification to so many of our public ‘confessions’. We say we want to be invisible, yet we beg to be acknowledged. Stepping in front of the class we become laboratory rats, frogs in the dissection tray, interactive multimedia learning experiences.

‘How old were you when you first realized you were a frog, Mr. Green?’  
 ‘How did your parents react when you told them you were a frog?’  
 ‘Do you date? Do you tell your partners you’re a frog?’  
 ‘So, how does it work? I mean, uh, can you, like, do it?’

No one has really ever suggested that I am an actual frog—but these are essentially the questions that are most frequently asked. Of course, these questions are expected. I often sit in the audience as if I were a student until the professor announces that apparently the guest speaker will be late or has forgotten (unless the class is so small that the professor recognizes me as a stranger and quizzes me with her eyes, hoping I am there to take this class period off her hands, or unless my visit is a repeat performance and the professor knows me on sight). Then I rise up from within their midst, students gasping and murmuring around me: ‘It was sitting next to me and I didn’t know!’ ‘Oh, my God.’ ‘I never would have guessed.’ ‘He looks so normal!’ It’s fun to fool them, at first. It’s validating, reassuring. It’s educational. I get to show them that they never know who might be transsexual, that transsexual people are just like anyone, just like them. I am an object lesson.

I started out, like most transsexual speakers, just telling my story and leaving time for questions. Over the years I learned the most effective way to tell my story quickly, whetting the students’ appetites, planting certain concepts in their minds and leaving more time to respond to their questions rather

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than lecturing. I do this because when they see me think on my feet, when I can use spontaneous humour, when I am vulnerable to them, then they see me most completely as a human being. They come to trust me. I find this trust ironic because it grows very quickly out of their original expectations that I will not be what I seem, or that they would be able to tell that I am trying to be something that I am not. When I am successful, it is because they let go of their preconceptions and their prejudices, they realize that they can exist without those crutches of belief, that they can move through the world without fear and without certainty and still the world goes on. Nothing really changes when they acknowledge the existence of transpeople (transsexual and transgender people) and realize that we are not inherently monsters or perverts. Nothing really changes except that their compassion quotient expands exponentially. Nothing really changes except each of the students goes away with a little piece of me that they can own and mould and reinterpret as they wish.

I lose a bit more control of the use of my own story every time I tell it. Every time I lecture a class of 200 students, 200 more people in the world know—or think they know—something about my genital organs, even if I never talked about them. They learn more about me in one hour than my co-workers who see me every day will ever know—unless my co-workers sign up for Human Sexuality.

It's one thing to confine one's public confessions to the educational arena (as a guest lecturer), a world contained within the ivy-covered walls and ivory towers of inquiry and theoretical exploration (unless you are seeking tenure). It's quite another to venture into the political arena where theory and practice become one and there is little tolerance for exploratory gestures. Here you must act, advance, thrust and parry, and be prepared to compromise. There is no hanging back, no way of just checking in and then retiring. Once you have stepped into the ring, it's you and the bull: there is no escape without everyone knowing you did not have the spine for it. And they'll know why you didn't have the spine: regardless of what you tell them, it will be because you are a trans person. It's one thing to present yourself to a university class—where they know they must behave themselves in front of their professor, where they know they can be critical in private, on paper, in their intellectual analysis of some mutilated creature's pathetic display of narcissistic neediness. It's quite another to offer yourself up, uninsulated, as fodder for politicians and journalists who have no reservations about expressing their distaste for our ilk, and no reason whatsoever to care about us or our issues. It will take much more than a personal story and an attitude of 'specialness' for having lived on both sides of the gender fence to find any compassion in these hardened souls.

And why should we even be trying to talk to politicians and journalists? Such behaviour is completely at cross-purposes with the stated goals of medical and psychological treatment for transsexual people. That treatment is supposed to make us feel normal. We are not supposed to want attention as transsexuals; we are supposed to want to fit in as 'normal' men. We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies, pretend that the vestigial female parts some of us never lose were never there. In short, in order to be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure. Every time a transsexual man goes into a public (or even private) toilet he is aware of his history; every time he makes love with a partner; every time he seeks medical care; whenever he is at the mercy of a governmental body or social service agency, he is aware of his history—or aware of any anomalies in his body—and must consciously be on guard against discovery. And this is supposed to be the optimal ground of being for a successful person? I think not.

This burden of secrecy is reinforced by myriad social conventions and institutions that support rather than challenge individual prejudice concerning the existence of transsexual people. There are doctors who will not admit they provide services to us. Insurance companies deny medical coverage

for conditions relating to 'sex reassignment' or 'surgical sex change' (which can be extrapolated to mean any medical condition once one's transsexual status is known). Some governments or governmental agencies will not allow us to change our identity records to ease our passage through life. Employers are free to dismiss us because they feel that who we are is just too 'disruptive'. It is easy to see how a non-transsexual could feel justified in treating transsexual people with disdain or disgust. So long as their ignorance and prejudice protect them from expressing basic human courtesy to transpeople, non-transsexuals will continue their persecutions.

Yet all these obstacles have not stopped us. All this disapproval has not prevented—will not prevent—the existence of transsexual men and women. It is easy to see how transsexual people are typically justified in their desire to circumscribe knowledge of their past or present lives. And yet as more of us become visible, those whose livelihoods or relationships depend on maintaining secrecy may feel tempted to disclose themselves and take a stand, while they are simultaneously alienated from those who are doing so because their own circumstantial constraints compel them not to act. This inner conflict may breed the very same low self-esteem that activists are attempting to alleviate. The individual who is not able to reconcile his desire to help the nascent trans community with his own need for confidentiality and security may isolate himself further from the only people who share his experience, or he may actively oppose community-oriented efforts.

Can one accomplish anything for the trans community while remaining closeted? I do believe so, certainly. But I think many—not all—transpeople who want to remain hidden will resist making any blatant pro-trans noises for fear of calling attention to themselves. Having stepped out of the transsexual closet myself, I occasionally wonder when certain of my friends—both trans and non-trans—will feel the pressure of my growing notoriety and decline to be seen with me. I wonder who knows about my transsexual past, and who doesn't. Have my co-workers seen me on television? Have acquaintances seen my photo on the cover of San Francisco's queer community newspaper when it was on the streets for two weeks? Would they say anything about it if they had? Have my friends told their friends about me; is that why people seem so eager to be introduced to me? Are they kind, or are they curious? Is it me that people seem attracted to, or is it the exotic trans phenomenon?

Walking down the street in San Francisco or New York City, Boston, Atlanta, Portland, Seattle, London, Paris, Rome, no one seems to take any special interest in me. I am just another man, invisible, no one special. I remember what it was first like to feel that anonymity as testosterone gradually obliterated the androgyny that for most of my life made others uncomfortable in my presence. It was a great relief to be able to shake off layers of defensive behaviours developed to communicate my humanity from inside my incategorizability. It was a joy to be assumed human for a change, instead of stared at, scrutinized for signs of any gender. Now, whenever I stand up in front of a class or make any public statement in support of transgender or transsexual people, I am scrutinized for signs of my previous sex, knowing my gender is reinforced by my male appearance. No one notices me on the street, yet I have been on television and in films, my photograph has appeared in several national (US and internationally distributed) magazines, and I have been asked for commentary and interviews that have appeared in many more publications. In some cases I am identified as transsexual, and in others there is no indication as to my transsexual status. In some cases, my appearance in a publication has had nothing whatsoever to do with transsexualism (I do have other areas of expertise). And I have a lurking suspicion that I would not receive the attention I do (for non-transsexual-related accomplishments) if I still retained the androgynous appearance that I had for the first 40 years of my life. In fact, I know that androgynous people such as I was have often been passed over as subjects and spokespersons on such topics as women in non-traditional jobs because we didn't appear acceptably gendered, and this applies equally to pre-transition female-to-male people and post-transition male-to-female people.

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Now, however, people are quite comfortable with my male presentation. My psyche seems to fit nicely into male packaging; I feel better; people around me are less confused, and so am I. So why tell anyone about my past? Why not just live the life of a normal man? Perhaps I could if I were a normal man, but I am not. I am a man, and I am a man who lived for 40 years in a female body. But I was not a woman. I am not a woman who became a man. I am not a woman who lives as a man. I am not, nor was I ever a woman, though I lived in a female body, and certainly tried, whenever I felt up to it, to be a woman. But it was never in me to be a woman. Likewise, I am not a man in the same sense as my younger brother is a man, having been treated as such all his life. I was treated as other than a man most of the time, as a man part of the time, and as a woman only rarely. Certainly I was treated as a little girl when I was young, but even then people occasionally assumed I was a little boy. I always felt like something 'other'. Can I be just a man now, or must I always be 'other'?

The tremendous sense of relief that transitioning men feel marks what is probably one of the most satisfying periods of their lives. While immense challenges arise during transition, and while there may be a sense of urgency to complete the process that can obliterate all other external concerns, the sense of growing into one's self—of really becoming who one is at last—is so rewarding that it may erase the long-standing pain of being misunderstood concerning one's gender. The transition itself opens so many windows on the gender system that we may be compelled to comment on our observations, which could not be made from any other vantage point than a transsexual (or sometimes transgender) position.

An even further irony is that once a man is no longer visibly transsexual—that is, once his previous androgyny has been transformed to unquestionable masculinity—he may no longer be of interest to the press. I have had reporters at public events look right through me when directed to me as an expert or knowledgeable source. They do not wish to interview me because I do not look like a transsexual. Only after they somehow find out that I am a trans person are they interested in me, and then not for my expertise, but for the tingling quizzicality they can enjoy while they stare at me, hardly hearing a word I say, and wonder how someone so male ever could have been a woman.

Seeking acceptance within the system of 'normal' and denying our transsexual status is an acquiescence to the prevailing binary gender paradigm that will never let us fit in, and will never accept us as equal members of society. Our transsexual status will always be used to threaten and shame us. We will always wear a scarlet T that marks us for treatment as a pretender, as other, as not normal, as trans. But wearing that T proudly—owning the label and carrying it with dignity—can twist that paradigm and free us from our subordinate prison. By using our own bodies and experience as references for our standards, rather than the bodies and experience of non-transsexuals (and non-transgendered people), we can grant our own legitimacy, as have all other groups that have been oppressed because of personal characteristics.

Transgendered people who choose transsexual treatment, who allow themselves to be medicalized, depend on a system of approval that grants them access to treatment. That approval may be seen as relieving them of their responsibility—or guilt—for being outside the norm. They then become either the justification for the treatment by embodying the successful application of 'normal' standards; or they become the victims of the treatment when they realize they are still very different in form and substance from non-transsexual people, and they still suffer from the oppression they wished to escape by looking to doctors to make them 'normal'. By standing up and claiming our identity as men (or women) who are also transpeople, by asserting that our different bodies are just as normal for us as anyone else's is for them, by insisting that our right to modify our bodies and shape our own identities is as inalienable as our right to choose our religion (though not nearly as inexpensive or painless), we claim our humanity and our right to be treated equally under law and within the purviews of morality and culture.

Gender and genitals comprise a stronghold of control binding all people to a social order that has serious difficulty tolerating diversity or change. Somebody's got us by the balls and they don't want to let go. Who is that somebody? Who is so afraid of losing control? What are they going to lose control of? What is preserved by denying the legitimacy of transsexual (and transgendered) people? What is destroyed by acknowledging us? Is it the right of succession? Is it the right to own property? Is it the ability to know whether to treat another as an equal, an inferior, or a superior human being?

In the introduction to the 1994 edition of *The Transsexual Empire*, Professor Janice Raymond postulates the reason why 'there are not as many female-to-constructed male transsexuals'. She writes that for women:

the construction of gender dissatisfaction has been medicalized through promotion of breast implants, hormone replacement therapy, infertility hormones and reproductive procedures, and plastic surgery. (Raymond, 1994: xiv)

She also points out that:

Maleness is not so easy to come by, especially because the majority of vendors (professionals) are males themselves and more discomfited in giving it away. (*ibid.*: xv)

These are very female-centred positions, and don't allow any space for variant opinions. Raymond states that the medicalization of transsexualism prevents the destruction of stereotypical gender roles and reinforces sexism (*ibid.*: xvii). It is Raymond herself (in collusion with some of the doctors she so vehemently objects to) who has put us into gender boxes. Her dogmatic insistence that it is impossible to change sex and that transsexuals never move beyond gender roles are blatant reactionary responses to what she perceives as threats to female bodies, feminism and feminist politics—everything upon which she bases her own identity concept. Raymond's brand of feminism cannot survive without rigid gender roles, and especially not without the objectification and vilification of men as actors in either male or female roles.

Bernice Hausman (1995) also takes on the medicalization of gender, asserting that transsexuals are expert at the arts of impersonation, producing gender as the real of sex, though gender does not 'exist' (Hausman, 1995: 193). She claims that transsexuals are unable to accept and accommodate themselves to the sexual meanings of their natural bodies, and the demand for treatment is made to accommodate a cultural fantasy of stable identity (*ibid.*). She even takes gender away from homosexual people by claiming that 'gender is a concept meaningful only within heterosexuality and in advocacy of heterosexuality' (*ibid.*: 194). Yet, as Judith Halberstam has pointed out, '... lesbians are also turned on by gendered sexual practices and restricted by the limiting of gender to bio-binarism.' (Halberstam, 1994: 225). Refreshingly, Halberstam states:

The breakdown of genders and sexualities into identities is in many ways... an endless project, and it is perhaps preferable therefore to acknowledge that gender is defined by transitivity, that sexuality manifests as multiple sexualities, and that therefore we are all transsexuals. (*ibid.*: 226)

Halberstam goes so far as to say that 'There are no transsexuals.' And while I believe this last remark to be nobly intended, I must disagree with it if for no other reason than to acknowledge my own transformation. At least Halberstam's position gives us all individual voices. While Raymond wants us to take sides and rage against each other until someone dies, Hausman's effort to obliterate the discussion by dismissing the entire concept of gender renders us all speechless.

Gender is a form of communication, a language that we all use to express and interpret each other

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socially. For most practical purposes, however, the majority of our society have not learned how to separate sex from gender, and the use of the terms interchangeably (most commonly the substituting of gender for sex in an effort to avoid intimations of impropriety) only muddies the waters. The middle-of-the-road American sees a masculine woman or a feminine man, and he doesn't care who they actually sleep with. He's already figured out that they're queer, and he's ready to kill to protect mom and apple pie. The signifiers that matter are not necessarily the clothing, or the genitals (which are not visible), or the sex partner (who may not be present or apparent), but the qualities of character and non-genital physicality, as well as aspects of personal expression that may be cultivated or innate, that give the 'reader' an idea of the subject's masculinity or femininity, which the reader then may choose to apply to his understanding of the subject's maleness or femaleness, extrapolating further to define the subject's sexual orientation or activity. Thus gender is both expressed and interpreted, but it may not be interpreted as gender when the signals are mixed, that is when the body and the gender do not conform to the reader's expectations. Everyone uses gender to communicate, as much as we use our clothing, our posture, our vocabulary, our tone of voice. The fact that gender is problematic for some theorists as well as some transpeople is no justification for an attempt to mandate it out of existence.

Like Raymond, Hausman uses the fact of sex reassignment surgery as part of her argument against it, citing descriptions of surgery and post-operative pain in transsexual autobiographies. Hausman notes that the admission of pain serves 'to undermine the text's primary argument that the subject was really meant to be the sex he or she must be surgically fashioned into' (Hausman, 1995: 167). The implication is that if there is pain, then there is something unnatural about the body's situation. More faulty logic. Not all transsexual people experience undue pain with their surgeries. Not all non-transsexual people are pain-free, whether or not they have had any surgery. To embrace another two arbitrary extremes that can also co-exist in one physical body, both athletes and disabled people can attest to the pain that sometimes accompanies self-actualization. I don't see how the quality of being pain-free confers a greater veracity on a subject's experience.

Hausman says that to advocate the use of hormones and surgery in the service of gender identity: 'one must accede to the facticity of gender and its status as the master signifier of sex. In other words, one must believe in the simulation as real' (*ibid.*:193). The abstraction from broad experience that makes this kind of theory possible is reinforced by the exercises in self-justification that are most transsexual autobiographies (Denny, 1994).<sup>1</sup> The distance established by the printed page still allows most readers to perceive the transsexual subject as object, as less than human, or certainly dismissible. Rarely do transsexual people represent themselves as active agents in their own transformations. They are compelled to change. They always knew something was wrong. There's that binary thinking again: if something is wrong, it must be made right. Is it so surprising that transsexual people would seem to apologize for themselves in a world that has vilified and ostracized them?

What we need to understand, and why female-to-male visibility is necessary in order to bring the point home, is that what we experience is not something wrong, but something different. If Hausman sees gender as the mirage *doppelgänger* of sex, and sex as 'the real', she can have no context in which to comprehend those of us who experience our own reality differently. To me, my gender never was the signifier of my sex; my gender was, and is, the social expression of myself that I was unable to change to conform to the expectations others had of my sex. I tried hard to be a non-conforming woman. I believed the feminist line that biology is not destiny. Now I feel as if I'm being told by Gender Studies theorists that biology is not destiny unless you are transsexual. I cannot say that I was a man trapped in a female body. I can only say that I was a male spirit alive in a female body, and I chose to bring that body in line with my spirit, and to live the rest of my life as a man. Socially and legally I am a man.

And still, I am a different kind of man. I am not trying to encroach on the identities (or physical space) of women (so Raymond's argument holds no weight, especially her position that maleness is hard to come by). I am not worried about 'passing' for male or 'getting caught'. I am not concerned that men won't accept me, because my experience has been that they do. I am not worried about fabricating a past: I accept my past. I have continuity in my body, and the 'real of sex' for me is the way I express myself, as both a gendered and a sexual body.

Look! No, don't! Transsexual men are men. Transsexual men are men who have lived in female bodies. Transsexual men may appear feminine, androgynous or masculine. Any man may appear feminine, androgynous, or masculine. Look! What makes a man a man? His penis? His beard? His receding hairline? His lack of breasts? His sense of himself as a man? Some men have no beard, some have no penis, some never lose their hair, some have breasts. All have a sense of themselves as men.

Look! No, don't! Don't notice that I am different from other men unless you are ready to acknowledge that my uniqueness is the same difference that each man has from any other man. If transsexual men want to disappear, to not be seen, it is because they are afraid of not being seen as men, of being told they are not men, of being unable to refute the assertion that they are not men. All men fear this. In this way, all men—trans and non-trans—are the same. Many non-trans men have never thought about it because they have never had occasion to conceive of a situation in which their manhood would be called into question. But if they stop to think about it, I would venture to guess that all men would cling tenaciously to their self-concept as men, even if they lost their penis (though the loss of this unique organ would very likely be a serious threat to a man who had not examined his sense of self). One thing all men understand is that they are not women. This is also true for transsexual men, even though they have lived in female bodies. As soon as a transsexual man reveals his trans status, he is examined for vestiges of 'woman' that may then be used to invalidate his maleness, his authenticity, his reliability. Look! No, don't! What is true, what is false? What is a 'real' man?

I am real; I am an authentic and reliable man. I am also a transsexual man. I am a man who lived for 40 years in the body of a woman, so I have had access to knowledge that most men do not have. Invisibility has been a major issue in my life. Throughout my childhood and young adulthood I—my identity—was, for the most part, invisible. I was always defined by others, categorized either by my lack of femininity, or by my female body, or by the disquieting combination of both. The opportunity to escape the punishing inadequacy imposed on me by self-styled adjudicators of sex role performance was one I could not ignore. I simply will not accept a similar judgement of my masculinity. And I have yet to meet someone who could look me in the face, who could spend any time at all in conversation with me, who would deny my masculinity now the way they would dismiss it before as 'just a phase' or 'inappropriate behaviour for a girl'.

The fact is that the known biological aspects of sex difference—which we call natural and think of as immutable—are no more immune to change than the psychosocial manifestations of sex difference—which we call gender and cultural, and understand to be mutable (Hubbard, 1998: 46). One of the most difficult things for me to reconcile about my own transition was my movement out of a place in lesbian culture and into a white heterosexual embodiment. Let me emphasize: Not all transsexual men have lesbian histories, and not all transsexual men are heterosexual. Nonetheless, my personal politics are quite closely aligned with queer culture, so I am again a different sort of heterosexual man. I am not afraid of homosexuality, though I do not practice it. Many gendered and heterosexist social constructs collapse like cardboard sea-walls against the ocean of my transsexual reality.

Academics are afraid of being called essentialists,<sup>2</sup> but I am not afraid of saying that as an artist and as a human being I am motivated to express both the core and essence of my being-ness, and I will stand by the truth of my experience and the logic of my analysis. If phrases like 'male energy' are

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## NOTES

This chapter was  
sua, PA, on 21 Jul



too vague and ethereal (Raymond, 1994: xxi), what are we to do with phrases like 'the real of sex'? My experience of myself, corroborated by other functioning, self-actualized adults (both heterosexual and gay and lesbian) who have known me much or all of my life, is that I seem far more comfortable to myself as a man, more 'natural', and more acceptable to them. Not that they didn't love or accept me before my transition to manhood, because they did. Some of them were resistant, even fearful concerning my change. But they rode the wave, and most of us have landed together, still friends, still relatives, still intrigued by the possibilities in life.

There: was that the self-justification part, or was it evidence, testimony on behalf of myself and other transsexual men? When I state the facts of my experience, listeners or readers get to choose whether or not the tone they perceive is one of self-justification. It all comes down to attitude. In my transition I lost only two friends. I have gained countless more since then. And I have learned something about responsibility, about duty, and about what civil rights really means. I've learned how discrimination really works, and how class, race, sex—and gender—distinctions are used to empower some and disempower others. I've learned that power is relative, while strength is internal. Before my transition I was just a middle-class white transgendered female, ostensibly a woman and therefore lesbian (in my sexual intimacy), trying to make my way in the world, climbing the career ladder, building my relationships, enjoying my hobbies and pastimes, hoping that someday I would be recognized as a literary, musical, and photographic artist. During my transition I learned about shame, fear and hatred. I also learned what courage is. Since my transition I am just a middle-class white man, ostensibly male, who happens to be heterosexual (in my sexual intimacy), trying to make my way in the world, climbing my own career trellis, building my relationships, enjoying my hobbies and pastimes, working towards someday being recognized as a literary, performing, and photographic artist.

Look! No, don't! It all comes down to attitude. If you accept me—if you can acknowledge that I am a man, even a transsexual man— then you can accept that life has variation, life is rich, you don't control it, you experience it. You can still analyse concepts, you can still have opinions, you can even disagree with me. And if you don't accept me, well, then you don't. But as you go through life categorizing and qualifying, judging and evaluating, remember that there are human beings on the other end of the stick you're shaking, and they might have ideas and feelings and experiences that are different from your own. Maybe they look different from you, maybe they are tall women with large hands, maybe they are men who have given birth to their own children, maybe the categories you've delineated won't work in all cases. Look! No, don't! Transsexual men want to disappear because we are tired of being forced into categories, because we are beyond defending ourselves.

Look! No, don't! Transsexual men are entering the dialogue from more perspectives, more angles, than were ever theorized as being possible for them. Maybe if we are ignored we will go away. Maybe if we are continually not permitted to speak, not allowed to define ourselves, not given any corner of the platform from which to present our realities, then we will disappear and refrain from further complicating all the neat, orderly theories about gender and sex. Maybe if no one looks at us we will be safe.

At first I thought my transition was about not being looked at any longer, about my relief from scrutiny; now I know it is about scrutiny itself, about self-examination, and about losing my own fear of being looked at, not because I can disappear, but because I am able to claim my unique difference at last. What good is safety if the price is shame and fear of discovery? So, go ahead: Look!

## NOTES

This chapter was written in 1996 and presented at the Second International Congress on Sex and Gender Issues, King of Prussia, PA, on 21 June 1997.

1. I must admit that I have not read many autobiographies by male-to-female transsexual people, but I have read every one published through 1996 (by commercial publishers) written by female-to-male transsexual people, and I have been almost uniformly disappointed to find that every explanation sounds like self-justification, like a liturgy of cause and effect, like rationalization, even when it's the truth. People doubt, people wonder. People who cannot imagine the experience transsexuals have will probably always think of it as something false or deluded. This is why I have found educational public speaking to be so effective: people have a direct experience of my physical presence and my gender expression, and it becomes true for them in a visceral way they do not easily dismiss or forget.
2. Raymond reacts against such charges (1994: xx-xxi).

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