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Transgender Activism: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective

Sheila Jeffreys

ABSTRACT. Feminist analysis of transsexualism such as that of Janice Raymond has seen it as a deeply conservative phenomenon in which surgical mutilation is employed to maintain the genders of male dominance and female subordination. Transsexualism has a new face in the nineties in “transgenderism” which employs queer and postmodern theory to render transsexualism progressive. This paper argues that “transgenderism” is also deeply problematic from a feminist perspective and that transsexualism should be seen as a violation of human rights. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworth.com]

It is important that lesbian theorists and activists should analyse critically the politics of transgender activism. The 1980s and '90s have witnessed what has been described by its proponents as a transgender liberation movement.¹ This has significant implications for the individual lesbians who are undergoing hormone treatment and surgery, perhaps in greater numbers than before, for lesbian feminists who are being called upon to admit male-to-constructed-female “lesbians” to lesbian space and events, and for a lesbian feminist politics which is committed to the destruction of gender rather than “playing with it.” Transgenderism is a political issue, not one which should be relegated to individualistic explanations and solutions such as may be advanced by therapists and doctors. In this paper I want to consider the implications of transgender activism for lesbian and for gay politics, using a human rights approach.

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In the 1970s the feminist philosopher of science, Janice Raymond, delivered a swingeing critique of the medical construction of transsexualism in her work, *The Transsexual Empire*.² She argued that transsexual surgery represented political manipulation of the gender dissatisfied by the pharmacy, government maintained by medicine as once it was maintained by religion. Many feminists expected that this feminist perspective would gradually be adopted and that feminism would lead to the breakdown of gender stereotyping and so to the socially constructed “need” for transsexualism. This did not turn out to be the case. Transsexualism has a new face in the nineties in “transgenderism” which employs queer and postmodern theory and politics to render transsexualism progressive. These queer, postmodern politics demand acceptance that “transgenderism” is a part of the lesbian and gay movement and that the political interests of lesbians and gay men are inextricably linked to the legitimization of transsexualism. I will argue here that transsexualism might more reasonably be seen as a violation of human rights and should certainly not be uncritically accepted as a socially transformative force equivalent to gay liberation.

TRANSGENDERISM—WHAT’S NEW ABOUT IT?

Transgenderism purports to be more politically progressive than transsexualism. In theory, as Janice Raymond defines it, transgender “covers preoperative and postoperative transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens, cross dressers, gays and lesbians, bisexuals, and straights who exhibit any kind of dress and/or behavior interpreted as “transgressing” gender roles.”³ Some transgender theorists include lesbians and gay men within the transgender phenomenon on the grounds that “anyone who didn’t feel comfortable with hetero gender roles was a tranny.”⁴ In reality the public spokesmen tend to be postoperative transsexuals.

In the oldfashioned phenomenon of transsexualism, men, though small numbers of women are involved too, seek to “change sex” through surgery. They wish to become “real” women. Janice Raymond has pointed out that transsexualism is a construction of medical science designed to achieve three purposes. One is simple profit from the expensive surgery. Another is experimentation towards the achievement of mastery over the construction of body parts. The political purpose is the allocation to acceptable gender categories of those gender rebels who are seen to be disrupting the two-gendered system of male supremacy.

Transsexualism, in this analysis, is deeply reactionary, a way of preventing the disruption and elimination of gender roles which lies at the basis of the feminist project. Transsexualism opposes feminism by main-

taining and reinforcing false and constructed notions of correct femininity and masculinity. The vast majority of transsexuals still subscribe to the traditional stereotype of women and seek to become “real” feminine women.⁵ The conservatism of their and the medical profession’s conception of what constitutes womanhood is clear from transsexual biographies. These explain that the skills and personalities of the aspirants are transformed after surgery and hormone treatment. One racing driver found he could no longer drive well once he was a “woman.” A *Times* journalist found he was reduced to caring only about the small things of life and developed feminine intuition.⁶ What is disturbing to feminists in this phenomenon is that men are constructing a conservative fantasy of what women should be. They are inventing an essence of womanhood which is deeply insulting and restrictive.

The new generation of transgenderists has taken on board some of this criticism. They are inspired by postmodern analysis, too, which challenges any notion of fixed or biological gender. Most have had the operation when they still believed they were going to become “real” women then questioned this approach on discovering more progressive political theory on gender or when they realised they were not really “women” at all. They therefore sought to create a third category for themselves which would enable them to take the political high ground and criticize feminists for their political conservatism. The development of “transgenderism” might indicate the way in which transsexual aspirants seek to emulate the norm for womanhood in their time period. In a period in which feminism has had some success in questioning the rigidity of gender roles a new model was required if transsexualism was not to look hopelessly retrogressive.

Transgender theorists such as Kate Bornstein in the U.S., a male-to-constructed-female “SM dyke,” and Jane Langley and Julie Peters, two male-to-constructed-female “lesbians” in Melbourne, put forward arguments as to the new and progressive nature of transgenderism compared with old-fashioned transsexualism, which aspired to a sexist stereotype of womanhood.⁷ But transgenderism is represented as particularly progressive because transgenderists do not believe that a transsexual becomes a woman. They do not believe that an operation is necessary in order for a person to be transgender, though they have had such operations themselves. They adopt postmodern theory on the flexibility of gender, believe gender to be a social construction and claim to be anti-essentialist. In their analysis transgenderists represent themselves as missionaries of anti-essentialism whose crusade is to teach all others that gender is flexible.

They argue that transgenders represent a third sex which possesses the powers enjoyed by the shamans of native America, the power to heal,

particularly the gender rift between men and women, and have visions. But this new model has not had much influence on traditional transsexualism. Frank Lewins, in a new book on transsexualism in Australian society, rejects the notion that transsexuals can be considered a "third gender." His interviews with 55 transsexuals "tell us that they are not a third gender but conform to existing expectations of feminine women."⁸ In those he interviewed, there were, he says, "no sexual revolutionaries. Whether heterosexual or lesbian, they all saw themselves as women. . . ."⁹ Interestingly even the most "progressive" transgenderists, such as Bornstein, are determined to be addressed by the female pronoun and are angry that some feminists deny them this right. If these transgender revolutionaries are really keen on the transformative disruption of categories one might expect that their concern to invent a third sex might be accompanied by the desire for a "third" term which means neither male nor female.

From a feminist perspective it is questionable whether transgenderists really challenge gender stereotypes. Their whole lives and identities, usually to the extent of very serious self-mutilation, have been formed around a belief in gender. It is women and men who espouse feminist understandings and reject gender entirely who are really challenging "gender." To be transgender you need to believe that there is something to "trans." Feminists who have rejected the limitations of "gender" tend to be unsympathetic to men who seem still to be obsessed with it. Books by "transgenderists" are as popular as those by "transsexuals" in a way in which feminist work which requires the abandonment of gender is not. Transgenderists would find it difficult to abandon gender because their life's project would then lose all meaning.

As Janice Raymond suggests, men who are committed to eradicating gender categories can do that by getting together to be profeminist and seeking to attack the social construction of masculinity. They can take a directly political course. Transgenderists are committed to their own "performance" of gender not to eliminating it. But not all postoperative male-to-constructed female transsexuals remain committed to "gender" however. Terri Webb, writing in the new Routledge collection, *Blending Genders*, is someone who has realized the error of seeing his transgenderism/transsexualism as progressive in any way.

Many transsexuals claim to be women when we are in fact men. Whereas a couple of years ago I could only speak for myself when stating this view, now I feel able to speak for all male-to-female transsexuals when I say that without any doubt we are men, albeit men with a desperate need to be women.¹⁰

Terri Webb considers that his ten years of transgender activism were “an unsuccessful attempt to get others to legitimise my fantasy.” His rejection of the practice and politics of transsexualism is profound.

I have heard a psychiatrist give the opinion that if a man comes to him and claims to be Napoleon he does not attempt to cure him by amputation of one of his arms. The question we should now be asking ourselves is whether we have the right to pretend to be women, not what “rights” the rest of the world should give us in order to go along with our fantasy.¹¹

Webb attributes his desire to a basic envy of women’s reproductive abilities combined with a “childhood experience of sadistic homosexual abuse. I believe this led me to a horror of all that is male.”¹² There are other reports in literature by and about transsexuals of homosexual child abuse. The collection *Male Order* about male street prostitution in London includes accounts by male prostitutes including transsexuals, whose abuse by men makes them unable to relate to men on any basis of trust, or, perhaps, even to remain in a male body.¹³ Any consideration of the ways in which violence and abuse in childhood and in the sex industry contribute to the phenomenon of transsexualism should cause lesbian and gay political activists some wariness about believing in its progressive nature.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION

In the last few years several impressive volumes have been published on women’s rights as human rights.¹⁴ Feminist human rights theorists are seeking to include practices of violence against women by men in human rights theory. They are expanding traditional masculine understandings of human rights to include the violence done by individual male actors as well as violence done by the state or its agents. I suggest that transsexual surgery and hormone treatment should be seen as state sanctioned violence.

It would now probably be quite well-accepted that lobotomy, as carried out in the fifties and sixties on lesbians and gays in mental hospitals to “cure” them, is unacceptable. Lobotomy would be seen, at least by gay activists, as state sanctioned and financed political surgery to cure a political problem. It could be likened to political psychiatry in the Soviet Union. I suggest that transsexualism should best be seen in this light, as directly political, medical abuse of human rights. The mutilation of healthy bodies

and the subjection of such bodies to dangerous and life-threatening continuing treatment violates such people's rights to live with dignity in the body into which they were born, what Janice Raymond refers to as their "native" bodies. It represents an attack on the body to rectify a political condition, "gender" dissatisfaction in a male supremacist society based upon a false and politically constructed notion of gender difference.

It has always been a basic understanding of feminism that women's bodies are not the problem. Feminists rejected the characterization of women's bodies by the medical profession as diseased and deeply problematic and continue to do so. Feminist theorists have shown the connections between the way in which nineteenth-century doctors explained women's discontents as "hysteria" resulting from possession of a womb or clitoris to the actions of contemporary doctors seeking to pathologize menopause.¹⁵ The women's health movement understood that our bodies are very important since we inhabit them and they affect our experience. Rejection and pathologisation of our bodies means rejection of ourselves as women. This idea is exemplified in the title of the very successful women's health book, which is still regularly republished by demand, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Early feminist consciousness-raising groups usually started with the body and the damaging ways in which women were pressured to find their bodies inadequate or unclean and perform mutilations upon them. These mutilations of femininity that consciousness-raising was aimed at alleviating included dieting, corsets, high-heel shoes, all quite direct attacks upon the body to achieve a political aim of female subordination.

A useful way of understanding the significance of such female self-mutilation is provided by Rhoda Howard in a paper entitled "Health Costs of Social Degradation and Female Self-Mutilation in North America" which appears in a collection on human rights. She defines social degradation as the "treatment of categories of people as inferior, deserving of lesser respect than others or indeed of no respect at all."¹⁶ She defines mutilation as "a change in one's physical makeup or a way of adorning or clothing one's body that has detrimental health consequences."¹⁷ She explains that female self-mutilation has three aspects, "mutilations that women perform directly upon themselves, voluntary submission to others for mutilatory purposes, and socialization practices by which older women either mutilate young girls directly or train them to mutilate themselves." In North American society, she suggests, at the time that women have received some economic and political liberation they have become "more firmly victims of the ideology of their own physical unworthiness."¹⁸ Women "despise" their own bodies and spend enormous amounts of time, energy

and money attempting to reshape, cleanse or diminish their bodies. The medical profession is frequently the agent of this self-mutilation through “cosmetic” surgery.¹⁹

Howard raises the concept of self-mutilation in a book on human rights because she considers that the cultural subordination of women and other degraded categories of people is routinely disregarded in much of the current international human rights debates and particularly those on cultural relativism and on group and collective rights. Self-mutilation, she suggests, demonstrates the narrowness and inadequacy of considering only formal aspects of inequality such as economic opportunity when seeking to define the inequality of women. Women, like other degraded social categories such as homosexuals, blacks and Jews experience “inferiorization in everyday life.”²⁰ She is particularly critical of communitarian theorists who criticize the concept of individual rights in favor of a holistic, unitary and egalitarian group or community.

Communitarianism from above, as it were, often defended by elite males whose very status as male means accumulated prestige as they acquire families and become heads of households, disregards the effects of community on those below.²¹

The philosophy of communitarianism needs to consider “intra-community violence perpetrated against particular degraded status categories, including socialization practices that cause degraded individuals to commit violence–self-mutilation–against themselves.”

The men who choose the self-mutilation of transsexualism come from two degraded categories, those who feel unable to love men in the bodies of men and transsex to become “heterosexual” men and those who continue to love women and call themselves “lesbians” after the operation. The latter do not carry the shame and loss of status of homosexuality but the shame of being unable to uphold the male dominant gender role. The low status of homosexuality for men is demonstrated in other forms of self-mutilation which have become inextricably associated with the homosexual identity as promoted in the gay and straight media. These other varieties of self-mutilation include piercing, tattooing, branding and many of the practices of sadomasochism. Recent literature on transsexualism in the lesbian community draws connections with the practice of sadomasochism. Lesbians in SM practice seem more likely to “transsex” than others.²² It is interesting that the mutilating practices have become the public face of homosexuality precisely at the moment at which lesbians and gay men have achieved greater visibility and formal rights. Rhoda Howard explains women’s greater attraction to self-mutilation as being a

reaction to greater formal equality. The self-mutilation represents self-effacement.

The recently implemented political and legal equality of the two sexes threatens the social honour of males and impels women to reassure them by intensifying their own symbolic acceptance of their proper, degraded social status.²³

This analysis might profitably be applied to gay men and lesbians. Apparently greater public acceptance may be linked with the phenomenon of mass self-mutilation by these groups just at the moment when political pride might be expected to lead to proud assertion of physical integrity. The "transgender" practices which do not necessarily involve chemical and surgical mutilations, such as drag, might perhaps be understood as symbolic mutilation, a way of undermining the potential threat of homosexuality to traditional masculinity. Certainly the enthusiasm for drag and all transgender performance in the popular media, exemplified in the enthusiasm for the film *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, would suggest that the heterosexual public is reassured by homosexual self-mutilation.

The practice of transsexualism, like some of the other self-mutilatory practices that women and men are engaging in, has longterm health consequences. The taking of very large doses of female hormones creates the risk of breast and other cancers.²⁴ Breast implants create the serious dangers for men that they pose for women too, of autoimmune disease. The self-administration of silicone into breasts, thighs and buttocks is carried out in some parts of the world to supply heterosexual men with non-threatening male sexual partners. In such cases transsexualism can be seen as enabling the survival of macho heterosexuality. In countries like Thailand and Brazil the sex industry fuels transsexualism. "Heterosexual" men require access to prostituted men but wish those men to resemble women so that they can maintain a heterosexual identity.²⁵ The result in such cases is often very severe and life-threatening mutilation. In response to feminist critiques of the health risks of transsexualism the new celebratory transgender literature has a rather inadequate answer. Zachary Nataf in *Lesbians Talk Transgender* argues that transsexuals understand the risks and cheerfully choose them to achieve their translation.

Rad fems in their arrogance believe they know best what's good for other people. They don't seem to listen or hear when transgendered people say they are healing themselves and choosing the best options to turn around dysfunctional lives, fully accepting the health risks of the surgery (which is radical and intrusive) and hormones (which

increase the likelihood of breast cancer in MTFs and liver cancer in FTMs, among other conditions). It is worth the risks to live their lives as themselves and as they choose. . . .²⁶

The women's health movement, however, has not generally been deterred by the fact that some women defend dangerous and unnecessary practices such as high rates of caesarian sections, breast implants, reproductive technology and contraceptive techniques. There has always been an understanding that it is male supremacy which creates the "problem" and the conditions of "choice" and male supremacist medicine which provides the illusion of a solution.

The social consequences of transsexual surgery are grievous. Raymond, in her new (1994) introduction to *The Transsexual Empire*, says that one of the most prestigious institutions in the U.S. to carry out transsexual surgery, Johns Hopkins, has abandoned such work after discovering that the outcomes for those who had the operation were no better than those who did not.²⁷ Roberta Perkins, in his study of 157 transsexuals in Sydney found that they suffered greatly from unemployment, rape and battering, loss of friends and family.²⁸ Other studies have suggested that suicide remains a common danger after the operations as it is before. Transsexuals have grave difficulties in forming stable and enduring sexual relationships, particularly with other men.²⁹ But there are very few follow-up studies of transsexuals.

POSTMODERN LEGITIMATION

Transgender activists tend to use postmodern theory to support the progressive nature of their project. Apart from the anti-essentialism of postmodern theory, an idea that seems to have been adopted rather inappropriately by such gender loyalists as transgender activists seem to be, there are other postmodern ideas that have been used to justify transgenderism which cause some disquiet to feminist theorists. Some of the most respected stars of postmodern lesbian and gay theory represent transgender practices as politically progressive.³⁰ They represent these practices, usually the traditional practices of gay men which have been seriously criticized by feminists, as central to the feminist project of ending the heteropatriarchy. By demonstrating that gender is flexible and need not be tied to biology, transgenderists are seen as destabilizing the gender system on which the organization of male power is founded. The transgenderists are said to "play" with gender, showing that it is not to be taken seriously and can just be a source of fun and a matter of "performance."

Zachary Nataf, an “FTM,” in the recent British collection of remarks by men who consider themselves “lesbians” and women who consider themselves straight and gay men, *Lesbians Talk Transgender*, remarks, having quoted Jean Baudrillard and Judith Butler, that “Everyone performs their gender as a matter of course.”³¹ But the “gender” that is performed has lost all of the political meaning which it carries in feminist theory. Nataf, like other queer/postmodern theorists of the gender play-school, sees gender as a useful way of creating sexual and sartorial excitement which will continue to exist because it’s fun.

Do we need gender? For some, gender is only a tool of the erotic, a way of focussing desires and attracting others. Perhaps genders/sexes could function more like language, motivated but arbitrary signs carrying desire as words do meaning but remaining only signs for our manipulation, not essential realities in themselves.³²

Lesbian feminist critics have challenged this conviction that “playing” with gender is transformative and argued that the whole conception of “gender” that underlies this approach is seriously flawed.³³ The postmodern conception of gender, as simply sets of clothing and attitudes which can be swapped or combined at will, does not gel well with the materialist feminist definition which sees masculinity and femininity as the behaviors of the oppressors and the oppressed.

As the French radical feminist theorist Christine Delphy has pointed out, “gender” will not have a place when women are free.³⁴ Rather than simply representing timeless human qualities which need to be combined in androgyny and have been unfairly distributed between the sexes, the qualities of masculinity and femininity are the behaviours of male dominance and female submission and will have no place when this system has ended. Dee Graham has offered a similar and also very useful way of understanding “femininity.” In her wonderful book, *Loving to Survive*, she characterises femininity as representing the behavior of hostage to captor now understood to be part of Stockholm Syndrome, a situation where the hostage fears for her life but bonds to the captor because she is dependent on him for survival and he shows some small kindness. Graham has developed the idea of Societal Stockholm Syndrome to explain women’s bonding to men under a regime of sexual terrorism in the form of heterosexuality, femininity and the rejection by so many women of feminism.³⁵

The postmodern project of “playing” with gender has provided a good defense for those gay men who are attached to the practices of drag and camp and seek to defend them from feminist criticism. According to this

notion of gender as simply “idea” rather than material political reality, the audience which witnesses the performance, presumably the unenlightened who thought that gender was fixed by biology, will suffer a flash of recognition of the flexibility of gender and realize they do not have to act out gender rules. There does not seem to be much evidence that heterosexual drag audiences are thus enlightened. Masculinity and femininity are not simply adopted as the result of false consciousness. In fact the ritual male celebration of femininity can be seen as insulting by women who have suffered from its restrictions and for whom it is anything but voluntary but the behavior of subordination. “Gender” is a great deal more than an “idea” in the lives of most women who are in no position to “play” with it. Economic and even physical survival can be dependent both on donning the accoutrements of femininity and performing the real material work associated with it, housework, sexual work, childcare. When “gender” means looking like a sex object and still managing to do the housework, often in conditions of violence and abuse, gay men’s admiration for drag can be difficult to understand.

The other idea that feminist theorists have questioned is the tendency in postmodern theory to see the body as a “text” and somehow not quite real. For feminists who base their ideas on the material reality of women’s bodies and see women’s oppression as being very much lived out through the control and experience of their bodies, this notion does not seem adequate. Somer Brodribb has argued, in her swingeing critique of the adoption of postmodern masters by some feminist theorists, the major postmodern theorists could be seen as engaging in a serious version of mind/body splitting, that major error of male supremacy which feminists have been committed to exorcising.³⁶ The idea of the body as text seems particularly inappropriate to transsexualism yet it is used by defenders, such as Judith Halberstam, and practitioners, such as Sandy Stone, a male-personality-to-constructed-female, as a way of understanding transsexualism.³⁷ Transsexuals, according to such an analysis, are simply reinscribing the “text” of their bodies. But transsexualism is permanent and brutal in its effects upon health and well-being. After transsexual surgery further playful reinscription is not possible. The postmodern tendency to downplay the importance of the body somehow fails to appreciate the significance of surgery for transsexuals. There is nothing playful about it. Raymond Thompson here describes the interlude between two of the complicated operations which constructed her “penis.” Constructed out of skin and flesh from her leg it was connected with her hip for a blood supply.

. . . I still had to go through six months of cleaning pus from the open wound, which seemed to stay raw for ever. . . . All this time I had a long flexible tube going into my hip, just below the incision, coiling around inside my abdomen, to drain off the bad blood.³⁸

Feminist theorists are quite reasonably concerned that postmodern theory is unsuitable for addressing these kinds of experiences. Renate Klein has written persuasively about the inadequacies of the burgeoning field of “feminist” postmodern theory of the body for understanding the ways in which oppression impacts upon embodiment.³⁹

CAN TRANSSEXUALS BE LESBIANS?

In Lewins’ study 47% of the male-to-constructed-female transsexuals related to men after the operation, “a third (31 per cent) were clearly lesbian in their sexual orientation and about one-fifth (22 per cent) asexual.”⁴⁰ Male-to-constructed-female transsexuals who have always related sexually to women and continue to do so after transsexual surgery redefine themselves as “lesbians.” As a result of this redefinition some demand entry to women only and lesbian only spaces and events. Feminist commitment to women-only space is based upon a definition of “woman” as a political category created through oppression. “Woman” is the result of the experience of living as a woman under male supremacy. This includes the experience of living in and as a female body and the way in which the actual or potential activities of this body, menstruation, child-bearing are constructed in male supremacist society. It means having a lifetime’s experience of the way in which the politics of body language and space diminish and restrict women’s freedom. Women-only space and women-only events were created to allow women freedom from the constraints of women’s oppression in which a different vision could be created and different possibilities realized. Someone raised as a man and in the body of a male who develops the idea that he has within himself the essence of womanhood or feminine gender is seen by many feminist theorists as suffering from a fantasy created precisely out of the male supremacist notions of what a woman should be that feminists seek to escape. His desire for women-only space is likely to be very different from that of feminists. He wishes to enter women-only space so that he can be accepted as a “real” woman whilst feminists seek to enter women-only space so that they can radically deconstruct and recreate what “woman” could mean beyond men’s definitions. Some transgenderists do not support this entryism. Kate Bornstein, in particular, says that women should

be allowed their space.⁴¹ But the demand for entry has caused very serious political disagreement between women and the breakup of many women's groups when some have championed the cause of transsexuals and others have opposed.

Lesbian feminists have even greater difficulty in accepting that surgically constructed "lesbians" should take part in lesbian-only activities and enter lesbian-only space. It was lesbian feminists who revalued the term "lesbian" from a term of contempt and made it a badge of pride to the extent that it is now an acceptable term for many who would never call themselves feminists. The lesbian feminists who reclaimed the term meant something particular by it. It represented rebellion against male supremacy. The lesbian has been defined in lesbian feminist theory as "the rage of all women condensed to the point of rebellion" or "an act of resistance."⁴² Lesbianism has been seen as a proud determination to love and value women, the second-class citizens of male supremacy, against all odds. Lesbians have borne the hatred and punishment that male supremacy allots to those seen as transgressing women's subordinate role. Lesbians have been proud to see themselves as "uppity" women. The women-only and lesbian-only spaces that lesbian feminists set up from the earliest days of the late sixties and early seventies were places and organizations in which to build a rebellious and womanloving culture of resistance and pride.

The male-to-constructed-female transsexual who calls himself a "lesbian" has a very different meaning for that word. He has not changed his sexual orientation or developed a rebellious one. His love of women was socially approved before surgery and he loved women from the standpoint of a male, a member of the dominant class. He has not overcome society's hatred of lesbians and women in order to love another like himself. He remains "heterosexual" but has changed his body and feels the need to change his identifier to suit. He has not loved women out of the experience of being a woman. Terri Webb, the MTF transsexual activist who has rejected the practice and politics of transsexualism and identifies as a man, is also honest enough to identify as "gay" because he relates sexually to men.⁴³ It would show some respect for the lesbian community if those MTFs who want to have sex with women were honest enough to identify as "heterosexual" but there seems to be little enthusiasm for this course. Many lesbians have much sympathy for constructed "lesbians," recognizing them to be very unhappy men with grave personal and political difficulties to face, but their struggle is a different one from that of lesbians.

WHY ARE LESBIANS TRANSSEXING?

Female-to-male transsexuals have always been considerably less numerous than male-to-female. In Frank Lewins' recent study in Australia, the low number of female-to-males, 5 out of 60, caused him to feel he could conclude nothing about what transsexualism meant for women aspirants.⁴⁴ The issue of lesbians transsexing to become men, either straight or gay, has not received much attention within lesbian theory and politics. Female-to-male transsexuals have not been demanding entry to lesbian space or lesbian attention in the way in which male-to-female "lesbians" have been. Feminists, who assumed that their politics was aimed at dismantling the very idea of what it is to be a "man" rather than becoming men, have not seen the transsexualism happening within the lesbian community as their issue. But it is now imperative for lesbian communities to pay attention. In the last few years transgender practices, from the taking of male hormones to full scale surgery, have been promoted as fashionable by queer theory, women's magazines, the Guardian newspaper. The spectacle of lesbians as freaks who really want to be men has returned with renewed vigor from the sexological literature of the 1950s to haunt popular women's magazines and lesbian literature today. Since the identity of "transsexual" seems to be learned from such sources then we can expect a proliferation of these very damaging practices amongst lesbians.

Until recently, literature on female-to-male transsexualism suggested that those seeking surgery were all relating to women beforehand and did not feel able to do that in the body of a woman.⁴⁵ Rather than wanting to be "men" they wanted to eliminate all those body parts which reminded them they were women. As Mark Rees in the new Routledge anthology, *Blending Gender*, remarks, "Of course I despise my female body."⁴⁶ It was a hatred of femaleness, not surprising in a womanhating culture, rather than a hankering for maleness which stimulated their aspirations. Transsexualism, for women, has resulted from their oppression as women and as lesbians. But recently there does seem to be a new phenomenon, which may not be statistically significant but is a serious cause for concern. Some lesbians, and it seems to affect particularly those who have been in the sex industry, are seeking surgery so that they may become "gay" men.⁴⁷

Lesbians Talk Transgender demonstrates the new, queer/postmodern fashionable enthusiasm for transsexual mutilation amongst lesbians. Zachary Nataf, who put together the comments by female-to-male and male-to-female "lesbians" which constitute this book, "lived as a butch lesbian for 20 years, a very effective strategy for coping with my gender dysphoria before I was able to believe that I could live as a transgendered person

without falling off the social map of what is permitted to exist.”⁴⁸ This comment could be interpreted to mean that the new fashionability of transsexualism and its political acceptance within the postmodern/queer theory in which Nataf writes, inspired Nataf to have surgery whereas she might previously have continued to live as a lesbian. She expects more publicity about the joys of transsexualism to encourage others towards surgery since she was only held back by her lack of role models: “What had been missing for me all those years was to see representations of transgender people, especially FTMs, and to hear their stories.”⁴⁹

The desire of some lesbians to escape their female bodies is taking the form of a cult of chemical self-mutilation through the taking of testosterone. The Australian HQ magazine July/August edition 1995 carries a piece on young American lesbians, “When girls will be boys,” again with sex industry links, who are injecting each other with large doses of testosterone.⁵⁰ The doctor who supplies the drug admits the health risks are unknown and potentially serious but he supplies them because he sees these lesbians as an oppressed minority of transgendered women who would otherwise get the drug elsewhere. Amongst lesbians the practices of chemical hormone use as well as actual surgery are taking their place amongst the proliferating forms of self-mutilation which have been promoted in the last decade. Sadomasochism, piercing and tattooing, along with other forms of self-mutilation which are not usually seen as “voluntary,” wrist slashing and “non-recreational” forms of self-damage, seem to have preceded chemical and surgical self-mutilation. Lesbians, suffering from oppression as women and as lesbians, might be expected to engage in self-mutilation like other oppressed constituencies. What is interesting about lesbians is that where some have avoided more traditional forms of “feminine” self-mutilation such as high-heeled shoes or tummytucks they have invented more lesbian-specific forms of mutilation. Self-mutilation is explained in the literature on child sexual abuse as a fairly common consequence of that abuse.⁵¹ It is beginning to seem as if men’s abuse of women in the sex industry is having similar results.

QUEER POLITICS

Queer politics, unlike gay liberation or lesbian feminism, specifically includes the exponents of transgender practices as well as other supposedly voluntary forms of self-mutilation such as sadomasochism within its constituency. The acceptance and celebration of transgenderism in these politics creates particular difficulties for any critical analysis. “Queer” events are commonly advertised as addressing lesbians, gay men, bisexu-

als, transgenders. In July 1995 there was a conference organised in Melbourne called "Have Your Say" on youth and sexuality. One of the organisers came to ask me if I would speak at it. I was surprised and pleased because the conference seemed to have a "queer" perspective, being for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth, and "queer" politics are not usually very receptive to radical lesbian feminism. I said yes I'd be happy to speak but I would have to include something about transsexualism as a human rights violation since that was my responsibility to any young lesbians and gay men present who might consider transsexualism. She immediately said that I could not then speak, since no political criticism of transgenderism was allowed. Criticism was seen as unsupportive of the "transgenders" who might be present and this was to be a very "supportive" conference. Speaking out against the medical and political construction of transsexualism has come to be seen as oldfashioned, censorious and puritanical.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

I have argued that transsexualism is dangerous to the health and social survival of those on whom it is practiced and could be seen to constitute a human rights violation. It is also dangerous politically to women's chances of freedom as it maintains the idea of gender dichotomy which forms the very foundation of male supremacy. Since transsexualism is socially constructed then it is important to consider how to counter the promotion of the practice. Frank Lewins points out that it is publicity about transsexualism which enables men to develop this "identity."

Although one-third of the transsexuals were convinced of their identity as women before they saw themselves as "transsexuals," half discovered they were transsexual at the same time or after they first had access to information on transsexualism, which was on average around eighteen years of age.⁵²

The medical profession need not direct the gender dissatisfied to surgery. Counselling is possible to encourage clients to take a more political approach to their situation and to realize that they can rebel against the constraints of a prescribed gender role, and relate to their own sex in their native bodies. Unfortunately many doctors are so convinced of the existence of a phenomenon they define as transsexualism that they do not offer any approach apart from self-mutilation.

Raymond Williams describes her first visit to the Charing Cross Hospital Gender Identity Clinic in London. The doctor asked what her earliest memories were and she told him that she knew she was a boy at the age of five. This convinced the doctor immediately that Raymond was a true and biological transsexual deserving of surgery.

This seemed significant, and he said that I might think those were my earliest memories, but in fact I had always been like this, even between nought and five.⁵³

The doctor then confidently put this sixteen-year-old girl on hormones and told her she had to wait for surgery until she was 21. Raymond in fact had a hysterectomy and double mastectomy before that time. Dr. D.H. Montgomery who writes the afterword to Raymond Thompson's story explains that there are two types of transsexualism, primary or "core" and secondary. He considers that 80% of female-to-male transsexuals are primary and that these proportions are reversed in male-to-females. With no evidence to support his conviction he seems convinced that primary transsexuals are biologically constructed by a putative surge of inappropriate hormones in the womb which masculinizes or feminizes the brain of the fetus.

If a solution apart from self-mutilation is to be available to the gender dissatisfied then it is important to interrupt the confident promotion of chemical and surgical solutions, even to the very young, by the medical profession, the popular media and fashionable queer politics. Janice Raymond does not consider that legislation outlawing surgery is the right way forward. I am not so sure, and classifying transsexualism as a human rights violation would be a step towards making surgery illegal. Terri Webb, the MTF campaigner for transsexual rights who now considers his actions mistaken, asks whether transsexuals who have reached similar conclusions should "campaign for hormonal intervention and sex reassignment surgery to be terminated?"⁵⁴ If even some transsexuals themselves are now asking this question then it seems reasonable that it should be on the agenda for lesbian feminists. Feminist human rights theorists have suggested that the state may be held responsible through its acceptance or promotion for violent practices against women. The state support for the agony of transsexualism through funding of the operations, for instance, and acceptance of the promotion of chemical and surgical solutions in its hospitals could be tackled via the recognition of transsexualism as a form of violence against the person and therefore as a human rights violation. It does seem that transsexualism is growing in significance as a form of the violent destruction of lesbian bodies, supported not just by the pharma-

cracy but by queer, postmodern theory and popular culture's exploitation of lesbians as freaks. It is time to open serious discussion of what the political response should be of lesbian activists and theorists to this old but newly vigorous form of lesbian oppression.

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