

Body Modification and Trans Men: The Lived Realities of Gender Transition and Partner Intimacy

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Abstract

Through an empirical analysis of YouTube videos, blogs, and interviews, this article explores how partners experience intimacy and desire in relation to trans men's body modifications. Building on Salamon's conception of trans bodies as emerging within relations of desire, I argue that partners' experiences of trans men's bodies are crucially shaped by their intimate bonds with trans men as people, rather than reducible to generic parts. Partners continue to experience trans men as essentially the same people through gender transition, despite fears that testosterone might alter their personalities. Their intimate bonds with trans men also open up space for new relations of desire to emerge, including attraction to bodily changes they might otherwise find unattractive. These partnerships work to expand ideas about which bodies can be desired as male or masculine, and undercut the literalness of sexual identity labels. Thus, the lived realities of gender transition, as they materialize within this context, challenge hegemonic conceptions of gender, sexuality, and desire.

Keywords

body modification, desire, gender, male body, sexuality, transgender, transexuality

I think that Michael¹ is sexy not because of the sex organs that he has, [but] because of the way that he talks, and the way that he walks, certain things that he wears . . . how his cologne smells, how he does his hair. I am attracted to Michael sexually, not Michael's body parts. . . . I've realized that [what body parts he has] is just not important to me,

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intimacy is what's important to me. . . . I feel that when you love someone, you kind of transcend beyond being a lesbian, or a bisexual, or a pansexual, or, whatever, or straight, you know, you just are a couple, and if you have intimacy I believe that you can get through anything together.

This quote is taken from a YouTube video in which Helen, a 27-year-old woman who appears to be white, discusses her relationship with her partner, a trans² man who appears white and similar in age. The video is one of many that Helen has uploaded to a YouTube channel for partners of trans men. In the course of her videos, Helen explains that she identified as a lesbian for several years before meeting Michael and that the two of them were in a committed lesbian relationship for five years before he came out as trans. Helen's privileging of her 'intimacy' with Michael over his 'body parts' challenges the reduction of trans people and their relationships to body parts in both medical and popular discourses. Yet, Helen does not strictly demarcate the 'intimate' as that which is not sexual or embodied, but instead suggests that sexuality and intimacy are entangled. This article delves into the interrelationships between sexuality and intimacy, and bodies and identities, by examining how trans men's changing bodies are experienced by established intimate partners. Drawing on an empirical analysis of partners' narratives in YouTube videos, blogs, and interviews, I explore a number of questions raised by Helen's narrative, including: Do sexual organs simply *not matter* for partners' experiences of intimacy and desire, or do they matter in ways not captured by dominant discourses that conceive of bodies in 'parts'? What is the relationship between the materiality of the body and the 'person', as experienced by an intimate partner? How does sexual identity matter for attraction to one's intimate partner?

I argue that partners do not experience trans men's bodies as 'dumb matter' or generic parts, but instead that partners' intimate bonds with trans men as people are crucial in shaping how they relate to trans men's bodies.³ Partners report that they are able to sustain an understanding of who trans men are as people through their gender transitions, despite fears about how testosterone might impact trans men's emotions, behavior, or ability to communicate, and in the face of the drastic bodily changes trans men undergo. The process of

sustaining an intimate connection to a trans partner – while understood by sociologists within the framework of emotional labor (see Pfeffer, 2010; Ward, 2010) – is also affective and embodied, and partners' narratives about this process work to de-link gender from conceptions of essential personhood. I also find that partners' established intimate relationships with trans men form the context for the emergence of new bodily relations of desire; partners feel desire for bodily changes they might find unattractive in other contexts, and find the process of bodily change itself erotic. Within the context of these intimate partnerships, ideas about which bodies can be viewed and desired as male or masculine are expanded, and the literalness of sexual identity labels is undercut. Thus, the lived realities of gender transition, as they materialize within the context of intimate and embodied relations between trans men and their partners, challenge hegemonic conceptions of gender, sexuality, and desire in a number of ways.

This article contributes to the empirical scholarship on trans sexualities and relationships in sociology and other disciplines, and connects it to theoretical work in the interdisciplinary field of transgender studies. By considering the embodiment of trans sexualities from the perspective of intimate partners, I integrate the empirical (primarily sociological) literatures on the embodiment of trans men's sexualities and on trans men's partnerships. Scholars have addressed how trans men understand and discursively signify their bodies, as well as how transition impacts their sexual practices, their preferences for sexual partners, and the intensity of their desires (Devor, 1993, 1997; Doorduyn and van Berlo, 2014; Dozier, 2005; Edelman and Zimman, 2014; Schilt and Windsor, 2014; Schleifer, 2006; Williams et al., 2013). This research, however, pays little attention to how intimate partners relate to trans men's bodies. The literature on trans men's partnerships, on the other hand, focuses primarily on issues concerning identity,⁴ including how partners of trans men negotiate their own sexual identities, and the emotional labor they perform to validate trans men's gender identities (Brown, 2009; Hines, 2007; Joslin-Roher and Wheeler, 2009; Pfeffer, 2010, 2012, 2014; Sanger, 2010; Theron and Collier, 2013; Tompkins, 2014; Ward, 2010; Whitley, 2013). Identity is a critical dimension of trans people's relationships, yet these studies pay less attention to how identities and bodies are co-constituted. This study builds

on the important questions addressed in each of these areas of scholarship by asking how identities and (changing) bodies are co-constituted within intimate relationships.

My qualitative study brings these areas of scholarship into conversation with recent theories of transgender embodiment, which have yet to be fully incorporated into the sociological literature. I build in particular on Salamon (2010), who adopts Merleau-Ponty's (1962) conception of desire as a 'being toward the other' to theorize how trans bodies emerge intersubjectively. In reconfiguring trans bodies as emerging from relations of desire, Salamon's work cuts against the tendency in some strands of transgender studies to over-emphasize (and scrutinize) the motivations of the transitioning subject. I explore these theoretical trends, and situate Salamon's work in relation to them, below. Although my main focus is on how bodies emerge within relations on desire, I also draw on Preciado (2013 [2008]) to theorize the role of testosterone and other body technologies in producing gendered bodies in the 21st century. Recent theories of transgender embodiment resonate with broader trends in theories of bodily integrity, affect, and biomedicalization, in positing that bodies are singular-plural entities that come into being through complex relations with (human and non-human) others (see Blackman, 2010, 2012; Blackman and Venn, 2010; Clarke et al., 2010; Shildrick, 2010).

Transgender Studies and the Politics of Body Modification

Since its inception in the 1990s, the field of transgender studies has been a site of debate about a number of issues concerning the inter-relationships between bodies and identities, and the material and social. The politics of body modification have generated particularly intense controversy. Contentions around body modification revolve around a distinction between transsexuals and transgender people (Elliot, 2010). The former are said to 'cross' sex through surgical operations and other body modifications in order to achieve 'coherent,' 'legible,' or 'intelligible' bodies that accord with their performances of gender and thus mirror dominant cultural views of gender. The latter aim to perform and embody gender in ways that work to queer dominant conceptions. These distinctions between transsexual and transgender people do not always match up to the

way these identity categories are employed by trans-identified people in their day-to-day lives, however. I briefly sketch the contours of this debate here in order to contextualize the body modification decisions made by the trans men in this study, and to highlight the usefulness of Salamon's approach to trans embodiment.

One set of transgender studies scholars (see Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1992; Stone, 1991; Wilchins, 1997) argue that those who do not aim for gender intelligibility (referred to as transgender people, as opposed to transsexuals) are more transgressive of gender norms, and thus more politically valuable. These scholars critique the discourse of being born in the 'wrong' body embraced by many transsexuals, arguing that it reproduces a view of gender as pre-social, and reinscribes a Cartesian mind/body dualism. Proponents of this strand of theorizing hold that trans movements should harness the political potential in the unintelligible, rather than seeking to solidify or stabilize trans identities, or to assimilate trans bodies into dominant notions of gender. Preciado's (2013 [2008]) book *Testo Junkie* provides one of the most recent iterations of this viewpoint. The book documents Preciado's own experimental use of testosterone, which is directed at 'intentionally increasing the level of testosterone in a cis-female' (2013 [2008]: 139–40). This experiment is not an attempt to cross from one gender category into another, or to align any inner conviction about the 'truth' of his/her gender with his/her material body. Rather, Preciado intends to develop 'a micropolitics of disidentification, a kind of experimentation that doesn't have faith in representation as an exteriority that will bring truth or happiness' (2013 [2008]: 398). To this end, the author advocates for the co-opting of testosterone and other gender technologies in ways that are not condoned by medical institutions and pharmaceutical industries; s/he refers to these appropriations of gender technologies as gender bioterrorism, piracy, or copyleft.

Other scholars (see Namaste, 2000; Prosser, 1998) argue that politically privileging those who resist gender legibility ignores the social privileges that allow some subjects to pursue such embodiments, and the deep desire some trans people have to attain a particular gendered embodiment. Proponents of this strand of theorizing (see Prosser, 1998) have generally positioned themselves, and the field of transgender studies, against queer theory; they contend that queer theoretical notions of gender performativity neglect the significance of the

materiality of the body for trans people. Prosser (1998), for example, stresses that central to transsexual experience is a disjuncture between the parts contained in the material body – which he describes as ‘unimpeachably real’ – and the parts contained in the body image. In contrast to queer conceptions of sex as ‘always already gender’ (Butler, 1990), Prosser holds that the necessity of body modification for trans people makes apparent that the body has a ‘fleshy materiality’ apart from its cultural constitution as a gendered object.

The trans men partnered with the interviewees and online respondents in this study generally modify their bodies in the pursuit of what Preciado and others might describe as coherent or normative forms of embodiment. According to their partners, they seek to alter the surfaces of their bodies to attain recognition by others as the men they feel themselves to be, and thus, unlike Preciado, they expect to derive fulfillment from modifying their bodies. And, in contrast to Preciado’s call to co-opt gender technologies, they access T and surgical procedures through culturally sanctioned psychiatric and medical channels. These trans men’s motivations for body modification thus align them with ‘transsexuals’ in terms of the debates considered above, though they typically refer to themselves as ‘transgender,’ or more frequently, simply as ‘trans.’ Further, though transsexuality is commonly reduced to the obtainment of genital surgeries, these trans men typically do not seek out such operations (though they often undergo chest surgeries and use testosterone). Their reasons for not obtaining genital surgeries (as I will detail below) are related to the cost of these surgeries and their dissatisfaction with the available surgical techniques, rather than calculated political attempts to produce ‘incoherent’ bodies. Moreover, as I will argue, to refer to their bodies as ‘incoherent’ or to presume that they are in some definitive sense ‘actually’ female misses the material ways in which their bodies are experienced by intimate partners.

Rather than scrutinizing these trans men’s chosen paths to securing livable embodiments (Salamon, 2010), I aim to document the complex configurations of gender, sexuality, and desire that materialize as their gender transitions are lived out in relation to intimate others. In doing so, I build on other scholars who deconstruct the rigid boundaries between the normative and non-normative characterizing debates about the politics of trans body modification. As Patricia

Elliot (2010) asserts, drawing on Bidy Martin (1994), 'What we take to be normative is already an idealized fiction of unity because all gender identities are multiple and complex' (Elliot, 2010: 73). In addition, I work toward a relational view of how bodies matter, rather than privileging the body subject, or individual trans person.

Toward a Relational View of How (Trans) Bodies Matter

Gayle Salamon's (2010) work makes several interventions into the debates cited above. Salamon argues that the trend in transgender studies toward more 'literal' definitions of materiality (as exemplified by Prosser) fails to account for the complex processes mediating the subject's experience of his/her bodily materiality. Salamon utilizes Merleau-Ponty's (1968) conception of the flesh to affirm the materiality of trans embodiment, while also emphasizing how this materiality is entangled with psychological and social processes. In contrast to Prosser's use of the term 'fleshy materiality' to invoke the body's unambiguously material substance, for Merleau-Ponty, the 'flesh' emerges through engagement with the world, and is inseparable from the embodied subject's psychic investments. The lived body thus cannot be understood as an unambiguous *presence* that can be counterposed to the unambiguous *absence* of the immaterial, but instead is 'located somewhere between [the body's] objectively quantifiable materiality and its phantasmatic extensions into the world' (Salamon, 2010: 64–5). Salamon uses these theoretical insights to contend that trans people's efforts to make their bodies more inhabitable are about more than reconfiguring its materialities, but about 'creat[ing] and transform[ing] the lived *meanings* of those materialities' (2010: 42, emphasis added).

Whereas other scholars have used these insights to theorize subjects' lived experience of their *own* bodies (see Slatman and Widderhoven, 2010; Sobchak, 2010), Salamon asserts that *desiring* others are themselves embodied subjects whose view of other bodies is psychologically and socially mediated. To this end, she utilizes Merleau-Ponty's (1962) theorization of desire as an intersubjective context in which bodies come into being. Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes desire as a 'being toward the other' that radically breaks down the Cartesian conception of bodies as discrete entities. Following this conceptualization, the bodies of trans men and their partners might be refigured

as modes of experience, or processes of perceiving, sensing, and desiring one another, through which, for each, the primacy of their own bodies/selves is decentered. This conception of desire as a dynamic process through which body-selves come into being converges with recent trends in affect theory that define bodies ‘by their capacities to affect and be affected’ (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 9). These theoretical interventions re-center discussions of embodiment around what bodies (can) do and the affective flows between bodies (Latour, 2004).

Salamon finds Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) conceptions of the radical particularity and unlocatability of sexuality and desire to be especially productive in accounting for trans sexualities. Merleau-Ponty holds that the relations between bodies cannot be reduced to or accounted for by categories of gender and/or sexuality, but instead that the forms sexuality takes are always particular. Merleau-Ponty leaves the content of this particularity vague, and my data point to the intimate and affective bonds between established partners as one significant form of particularity. Merleau-Ponty also argues that, although desire is embodied, it is not firmly located within any particular part of the body, but instead in the ““general function” which causes that part to be animated’ (Salamon, 2010: 51). This theorization contradicts the idea that the alteration of particular body parts must have drastic (and negative) consequences for embodied relations of desire. Merleau-Ponty’s theory also suggests that the desired body is registered affectively, rather than perceived as the visual absence or presence of parts; this view accords with Mike Featherstone’s (2010) conception of the affective body as the ‘body-without-an-image.’⁵

Accessing Trans Men’s Partners’ Experiences: Methods and Data

To address how partners experience trans men’s changing bodies, I analyze data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 11 partners of trans men, and publicly available YouTube videos and blogs where partners share their experiences with trans men’s transitions.⁶ Many potential interviewees (quite reasonably cautious, given the history of exploitative research within trans communities) questioned me about my politics and positionality before

agreeing to participate in the project. I was forthcoming to them about my status as an outsider to these communities, and shared my commitment to 'supporting trans(gender) diversity' (Rahilly, 2015). Interviewees signed informed consent forms outlining the purposes and methods of the project. It was not feasible to contact and collect consent from the numerous partners whose videos and blogs I analyzed, nor did my university's institutional review board require it, given that the data were publicly available. In using the YouTube data, I follow the precedent set by Tompkins (2011), who argues that the academic study of these particular online spaces aligns with the community members' own goals of educating the public about their experiences. While contributing to these public education efforts, I protect the privacy of all YouTube contributors, bloggers, and interviewees, as well as their trans partners, by changing their names.

I conducted the interviews in 2011 as part of a larger study exploring how partners negotiate trans men's transitions. I specifically sought out interviewees who were partnered with trans men through some part of transition, broadly defined.⁷ Of the 11 interviewees, all but one met their partner before he came out to others as trans. Thus, the interviewees were generally partnered with trans men as they navigated the personal, social, and embodied aspects of transition. The interview participants were primarily located in the United States; a couple of participants were located in Canada. Three interviews were conducted in person, and the rest were conducted via Skype or over the phone. The duration of the interviews ranged between one and two hours. When asked to identify their 'gender,' seven interviewees self-identify simply as 'female'; one as 'genderqueer/female' and one as 'genderqueer/male'; one identifies on the 'trans-masculine spectrum'; and one describes herself as a 'cisgender, cissexual woman.' All are white, most identify as middle-class, and when interviewed their ages ranged between 22 and 42. All had either obtained or were in the process of obtaining Bachelor's degrees, several had Master's degrees, and some anticipated earning doctorates. The interview questions used for this analysis were open-ended questions concerning the types of body modification pursued by interviewees' partners, and interviewees' own feelings about, involvement in, and experiences of these processes, both as they planned for and anticipated them, and as they materialized.

I also analyzed videos posted on three YouTube channels devoted specifically to partners of trans men, or FTMs: TmatesFTM, FTMSweethearts, and TransScribersFTM.⁸ Each of these channels is set up similarly; every week, the channel's organizers select a topic for discussion and post related questions. These topics are oftentimes proposed by channel viewers, many of whom are themselves partners of FTMs, or by channel contributors. As new partners are chosen to contribute to each channel, they begin with the original 'Week 1' topic and cycle through the list of topics. Contributors typically post 5–10-minute-long videos each week. In most videos, partners of FTMs appear alone, though in some videos the couples appear and speak together.

I reviewed videos on a wide variety of topics; for the purposes of this analysis I draw on videos from weeks covering issues relating specifically to trans men's bodies and body modifications.⁹ I was unable to systematically collect self-reported demographic data concerning the partners in the videos. However, video respondents seem to be slightly more diverse than interviewees in terms of race and ethnicity; while the vast majority of the partners in the videos appear to be white, a few appear to be people of color, one verbally identifies as half Black, half Filipina, and one verbally identifies as Middle Eastern. They are also somewhat more diverse than interviewees in terms of nationality. Though most who mention their geographic location reside in the United States, other countries represented include Canada, Finland, Britain, and Ireland. Almost all appear and/or identify as women, and a few of the women identify themselves as genderqueer. They seem similar in age to interview participants. I am unable to assess their general class backgrounds or levels of education, though a few video respondents mention that they are currently pursuing college education. I collected data from the YouTube channels in 2012 and 2013.

The YouTube channels provide spaces for trans men's partners to support each other and to collectively support trans men (see Ward, 2010). Much of the content of videos regarding testosterone and transition surgeries is aimed at sharing practical knowledge. For example, partners share information about obtaining access to hormones and surgeries, determining the proper dosage and scheduling of hormones, and the benefits and drawbacks of different methods of hormone administration and surgical procedures, as well as surgeons' names and prices. Partners display a remarkable expertise about the

practical aspects of transition, which points to the labor performed by partners who attend doctors' appointments, change surgical dressings, and sometimes help pay medical bills (see Pfeffer, 2010; Ward, 2010). They also collectively cheer on trans men as they progress through their transitions, by enthusiastically marking the milestones of their own and other contributors' partners, such as receiving a first injection of testosterone or securing a therapist's permission to obtain surgery. Although channel contributors devote much of their attention to affirming trans men's identities and often de-emphasize their own experiences, they sometimes disclose fears or express excitement about trans men's changing bodies.

I also collected data from the publicly available blogs of four partners of trans men in 2012 and 2013. I am unable to systematically account for the demographic characteristics of blog authors, though two blog authors are also contributors to one of the YouTube channels. The bloggers post with varying frequency and with varying levels of detail, and at the time I collected data had kept their blogs for periods between three months and two years. Bloggers differ in the extent to which they interact with their audiences; in some cases, bloggers address questions posted by viewers (who are often other partners of trans men). And although bloggers do not often directly address their trans partners through their blog posts, in many cases the blogs function similarly to the YouTube channels in serving as spaces where partners affirm trans men's identities, for example, by celebrating trans men's anniversaries of starting on testosterone.

It is important to note that these interviewees, video respondents, and bloggers are drawn from the subset of partners of trans men who stay with trans men through transition. As a few partners mention in YouTube videos, some relationships end following one partner's decision to undergo transition, for reasons that may be directly or indirectly related to transition. At the same time, I do not claim that my sample is representative of those partners who stay with trans men through transition; this sample likely over-represents white, middle-class, young, highly educated, and US located partners of trans men, though my use of multiple forms of data helps to increase the representativeness of the sample. Thus, rather than seeking to produce generalizable findings, I explore how this particular group of partners experience intimacy and desire in relation to trans men's changing bodies.

The Technologies of Transition: T, Surgeries, and Beyond

Preciado (2013 [2008]) declares that we live in an era in which all gendered bodies are technologically produced. Echoing other work on the relationship between gender, body technologies, and biomedicalization (see Balsamo, 1996; Clarke et al., 2010; Edmonds and Sanabria, 2014; Loe, 2004; Mamo and Fishman, 2001; Mamo and Fosket, 2009), Preciado places the manufacture and consumption of testosterone within the broader context of other gender technologies, including gender transition surgeries, the Pill, Viagra, and cosmetic surgeries. Preciado thus exposes the broader sociopolitical contexts in which gender technologies are utilized, and the significance of individuals' social positions in mediating their access to these technologies. In this section, I draw out the embodied processes of transition as described in the interviews, YouTube videos, and blogs, and situate these particular trans men's decisions about body modification within broader social, economic, and technological contexts. I do not aim to provide a generalizable description of the bodily processes trans men undergo to transition, as trans men may take several paths to transition, and may or may not undergo these, or any, body modifications. This description reflects the specificity of the group of trans men whose partners' experiences I analyze.

Nearly all interviewees, YouTube contributors, and bloggers say their trans partners are taking testosterone, which they commonly refer to as T; of the few whose partners are not, most say they plan on using it in the future. Most of the trans men who take T do so through injection, and many partners describe performing the intimate and embodied labor of injecting T into trans men's bodies. Many partners were in relationships with trans men when they first began T, and their trans partners have been using the hormone for periods varying from a few months to a few years. T, as detailed by partners, has a slew of striking material effects, including the growth and thickening of body hair, clitoral enlargement, deepening of the voice, redistribution of body fat, and other changes in the shape of the body and face, such as the broadening of the shoulders and jawline. Partners also point to changes in trans men's mood and personality as potential effects of T. Partners describe the changes effected by T as gradual and often unpredictable, as each man responds to the hormone in a unique way, and on his own timeline.

Many partners also report that T is often trans men's first permanent transition-related body modification, given that doctors often require them to take T for up to two years before obtaining transition surgeries. T is also easier to obtain financially for many trans men, compared to surgeries. Yet, even given this relative accessibility, the prevalence of T usage among these trans men may point to their overwhelming whiteness and affluence, as access to hormonal technologies is stratified by race and class, and various forms of privilege are required to navigate the medical institutions that regulate access to them (Preciado, 2013 [2008]).

Nearly all the trans men have had or plan to have top surgery, or one of a few available procedures for reconstructing the chest. Most partners say that top surgeries are crucial to trans men, as these procedures alleviate the intense dysphoria they commonly experience in relation to their chests, and aid them in attaining recognition as men in their daily encounters. Further, most say that prior to receiving chest surgeries their trans partners routinely used binders to flatten their chests, a practice that can be painful and potentially dangerous, and thus not necessarily sustainable as a long-term practice. Many of the trans men – sometimes with the assistance of their partners – are still raising money to cover the cost of this expensive procedure. Most of these trans men are located in the US, where the procedure is only sometimes covered by private insurance policies; partners from some European countries report that the procedure is covered by state health care plans. One US partner relays the disappointment she and her trans partner suffered when his surgery was cancelled at the last minute, due to changes in his insurance coverage. Whereas T gradually takes effect over months and years, partners describe the difficulties in adjusting to the sudden physical changes resulting from these procedures (though this suddenness is tempered by the years of anticipation preceding these surgeries, along with trans men's alteration of their physique through binding prior to them).

Only a few partners report that their trans partners are planning to have genital surgery, or what is referred to as bottom or lower surgery. Partners describe two available surgical procedures: metoidioplasty, in which surgeons 'free' the clitoris from the skin surrounding it, and phalloplasty, in which surgeons construct a penis using skin grafts. These surgeries present greater economic barriers than chest surgeries; one YouTube contributor comments that the prohibitive

cost of phalloplasty in particular means asking, ‘Do you want a house or do you want a penis?’ Further, they cite the perceived greater risk of medical complications and their dissatisfaction with the available surgical techniques as reasons for ambivalence about these surgeries. For the most part, the trans men who do intend to obtain bottom surgery plan on having metoidioplasty, which partners say results in a more functional, though smaller, penis. Though most of the trans men do not plan to have bottom surgery, their partners convey that many of them utilize body technologies including packers (prosthetics worn in the underwear for everyday or non-sexual occasions), stand-to-pee devices (devices which allow them to pee while standing up), and prosthetics (for sexual use).

T and top and bottom surgeries are the body modification processes most often discussed by partners; some partners mention that their trans partners have also contemplated ‘manscaping’ (in which liposuction is used to ‘masculinize’ the body by removing fat from areas such as hips and thighs) and surgeries to ‘masculinize’ the shape of the face. According to partners, many trans men also obtain hysterectomies and oophorectomies, or removal of the uterus and ovaries. Partners attest that these surgeries help to solidify many trans men’s sense of self (for example, by ending menstrual cycles, which are frequently but not always suppressed by the use of T), and that they have important health consequences, including lowering cancer risks associated with the use of T. Although I do not deal with these internal surgeries directly in this article, they may make productive grounds for further analysis, especially given their potential to push interpretations of bodily materiality beyond the body’s surface.

‘Will He Be “the Same Person?”’: T and (Potential) Changes to Emotions, Behavior, and Communication

Partners commonly express fears about how transition – and particularly the use of T – might change who trans men are ‘as people.’ Partners of trans men who have not yet begun to use T, or who are still anticipating its gradual effects, worry that the hormone might alter trans men’s emotions, behavior, or ability to communicate, leading to violent outbursts or extreme anger, sexual aggression, or the inability to cry or to communicate emotions effectively. Though most partners ultimately conclude that T does not change the essence

of trans men's selves, their fears about how the ingestion of a material agent (T) might affect their trans partners' selves point to the co-constitutive nature of bodies and identities. These narratives illustrate that the 'self' or 'personality' is always entangled with its material representation; partners point to the visible, palpable, and audible signifiers (including muscles, tears, and tone of voice) through which they experience their trans partners as people. These material manifestations of the self in turn gain meaning only through social definitions and processes. Temporality is also central to the negotiation of these issues; the processes of anticipation and adjustment that characterize partners' experiences with T provide evidence that bodies and identities are constantly emerging within relations with others.

A few partners express anxieties about trans men becoming 'different people' in ways that reveal how bodily features coded as 'masculine' evoke ideas about particular masculine behaviors or emotions. Some partners say they imagined and feared their partners' bodies morphing into monstrous, violent male forms; these images merge the body's contours and the personality. For instance, one video respondent, Helvi, associated growing muscles with aggressive behavior:

It's really dumb, but I sort of had this concern that him becoming more muscular would change his personality and he would become this person who fights at bars, and gets really aggressive or something, but yeah, I'm really starting to believe that that's not gonna happen.

Lauren, an interviewee, also presents an image of the caricatured masculine body, but connects her fear of her partner becoming a man to past sexual trauma:¹⁰

I have a trauma history, specifically with men, so to now be in a relationship with a man in this capacity, it brings things up, and I was terrified of testosterone when he started taking it. I thought it would turn him into the Hulk. I had nightmares for weeks about, you know, him taking a shot and just turning into this big green monster. And obviously that hasn't happened.

Helvi and Lauren are careful to punctuate their narratives by admitting that their fears have not come to pass, and in painting these fears as misguided they arguably perform important supportive work in validating their trans partners' identities and transitions (see Pfeffer, 2010; Ward, 2010). Temporality also appears crucial to their

claims that these fears are never realized. Other authors have pointed out that the bodily changes produced by hormones only become perceptible through technological manipulation, as in the time-lapse photography employed by trans people who document their transitions on YouTube (see Horak, 2014). These partners similarly experience a disjuncture between their imaginings of their partners' changing bodies, and the realization of these changes in real time.

Nevertheless, for them, the imagined body has the potential to overshadow the objectively present body. Their narratives suggest that the desired body is experienced as an 'absent presence,' or a play between presence and absence, rather than an unambiguous material presence (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In addition, they demonstrate that intimate partners' imagined bodies are imbued with affective resonances (see Blackman, 2012; Blackman and Venn, 2010).

Other partners point to the work that can be necessary to reconcile trans men's changing bodies with their sense of who their trans partners are as people. This process is exemplified by two partners who say that they have had to adjust their own reactions to their trans partners' changing voices, as they have become deeper and, to them, harsher-sounding.¹¹ Rori, a video respondent, describes communication difficulties that have arisen due to her partner's changing voice:

[Because] Devon's voice is a lot deeper now . . . things can come out sounding sharper or angry-sounding . . . That's come up multiple times for us, where in some situation, I feel like, why are you so mad right now, all of a sudden, and why are you speaking to me that way? And we talk about it, and that's not Devon's intention at all. And so, in those kind of situations, I'm recognizing that I have my own sensitivities, I have my own preconceived notion of what Devon sounds like and now that is different, and so I'm working with recognizing that I have to shift that a little bit, I have to re-learn what their intonation sounds like, and what . . . emphasis Devon's putting on different things means in their voice, and I recognize that I also am a very sensitive person, and so, um, this very quiet super soft-spoken introverted person speaking up in maybe a little bit louder or gruffer way is new to me, and I'm having to recognize that my own sensitivities are playing into our interaction with that as well.

While Rori reacts affectively to Devon's changing tone of voice, this reaction is re-worked by her own efforts to interpret material changes

within the social context of their intimate relationship. Rori maintains here that her partner is still the same person despite changes in their tone, yet her stable sense of her partner's self emerges only through social and interpretive processes.

Like Rori, Helvi, and Lauren, many other partners grapple with how T might impact their trans partners' core selves, and ultimately conclude that T does not alter the underlying essence of who a person is.¹² Some partners discover that T magnifies existing aspects of trans men's personalities. Joanne, an interviewee, refers to T as the 'hormone of excitement,' and says that she enjoys seeing her partner become more demonstrative. Others maintain that if T is causing a trans man to act violent or abusive, the dosage is simply incorrect, thus implying that T aids in the emergence of a person's true personality. These ideas invoke discussions about how the increasing use of psychopharmaceuticals impacts cultural ideas about self, identity, and authenticity. Some authors contend that psychopharmaceuticals have ushered in an era where selves are viewed as plastic or constantly open to transformation. For example, Emily Martin's (2007) conception of drugs as co-performers that allow individuals to learn or adopt new behaviors and traits, suggests that the self is transformable. Others argue that notions of authentic selves persist in the face of personality-altering drugs. Peter Kramer (1993) finds that even as Prozac alters mood and personality, it is interpreted by its users as enabling their core selves to emerge. Partners' narratives about the effects of T similarly reinforce the notion of authentic selves as stable or enduring, even in the face of trans men's bodily transformations. Whereas most of the debate on psychopharmaceuticals has focused solely on the individuals using these drugs, partners' narratives about T demonstrate how intimate relations are constituted through gender technologies, and how notions of core or authentic selves are – far from being essential or pre-social truths – *produced* through intimate interactions.

Changing Bodies and Shifting Desires: Entanglements of Sexuality and Intimacy

Partners' fears about whether T will change trans men as people point to the significance of the intimate contexts in which trans men's transitions take place. In this section, I examine how partners experience

desire for trans men as their bodies change. Their connections to trans men as people are central to their narration of these experiences, illustrating the entanglement of sexuality and intimacy. These narratives indicate that neither the desired nor desiring body can be understood as a raw substance or ‘fleshy materiality’ pre-existing social processes. Partners do not simply respond sexually (with their own bodies) to the objectively present material properties of trans men’s bodies, but instead, their own embodied experience of and desire for trans men’s bodies is inseparable from their intimate bonds with trans men as people. Trans men’s ‘flesh’ (as well as the ‘flesh’ of their intimate partners) thus emerges within relations of desire (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Some partners describe their desires as shifting along with trans men’s changing bodies. These partners say that desire for one’s trans partner’s body is sensitive to his own self-image, and that desire can be learned and/or re-learned in relation to his self-image. In some cases, partners describe learning desire in relation to a partner’s self-image from the beginning of the relationship. One video respondent, Helvi, reflecting on her partner’s chest surgery, says:

I think that now Chris is, well, he’s the sexiest he has ever been. And even though he hadn’t had the mastectomy [yet] when we got together, I knew from the beginning that those breasts [were] gonna go at some point, and they were not a turn-on for me, they were just there, and it’s a great relief that they’re gone now.

In contrast, other participants changed their definitions of which parts of the body were erotic, in response to their partner’s changing self-image, or their partner’s disclosure of his self-image. For example, Vivian, an interviewee, says:

In the beginning [of our relationship] I remember being really excited about his boobs, but now I could really care less, and I kind of like when he binds I think as soon as I realized how not interested in his own boobs he is, they became a turn-off. I don’t want to be attracted to this body part that he himself thinks is terrible for a lot of reasons, so I kind of switched that off, and now I think my attraction is growing with him, with the image of himself he wants.

Helvi’s and Vivian’s narratives illustrate how the desired body emerges somewhere between the objectively present body and the

shared psychic investments of trans men and their partners. They also suggest that the masculinity of the body is not reducible to parts – or, in this case, to the objective presence or absence of ‘breasts’ – but instead emerges within intimate and sexual relations. Another partner, Wendy, writing on her blog, documents the temporal emergence of masculinity in relation to other bodily changes, and shows how her intimate understanding of her partner helps her to adjust to these changes:

His back. When I wrap my arms around him, he’s more substantial, harder, firmer. That’s the first change I noticed. It was subtle and yet it wasn’t. Just two weeks ago, I think. I digested the change with my hands, my arms, my body: this feels good. I liked the warmth of it, the solidity, like his new muscles and cells were filling a space that had been waiting for them. Like his body was beginning to assume its rightful place. Then my head came and as usual Oh my god. Shit. Holy Shit. Wait. This is really fucking happening? My girlfriend is really becoming a man? Holy crap This is suddenly concrete. Next up: hair, voice. Evidence of gender. Evidence of maleness. And then, I quiet my mind and I see that in him, masculinity seems to be discovering its rightful place, nestling in and planting its flag. It belongs.

These narratives echo Salamon’s point that at issue in gender transition is not only the alteration of the body’s materiality but the *meanings* of that materiality; further, these meanings are produced within social contexts. At the same time, these partners do not experience trans men’s bodies as ‘raw flesh,’ but instead, their perceptions of and desire for trans men’s bodies emerge through embodied relations of desire.

A few partners describe the process of their partners’ bodily change as itself erotic, and discuss how these changes impact their sexual practices. Rachel, a video respondent who says she is generally more attracted to female bodies but loves her partner’s male body, speaks at length of the excitement she experiences in relation to her partner’s changing genitals:

I am sexually attracted to his dick growth, the more it grows the more I like it. I love exploring his changes, he smells different now, everywhere. And I like exploring it, and seeing how much it changes, because his dick, was you know, obviously like normal-sized for a bio

female, as a clitoris, and then, and then it started growing, and you just see these subtle changes, like, all the sudden, it's poking out more and more, um, folds are getting a lot thicker, and when you pull back any kind of skin, like how far back you can see, because now you can actually see like a ridge, it looks like an actual penis, it's really really cool, um, so I do, I find it really really sexy, honestly, I love it.

Another video respondent, Alyssa, similarly discusses her positive experience of her partners' changing genitals:

With the hormones he is getting growth downstairs, and his genitals are changing, which is really bizarre because, I didn't notice it at first, and then suddenly I was like whoa, okay, that feels different. Not bad changes, just changes, and because it's changed, knowing like, what gets him off and what makes him happy, all of that's changed as well. It's quite exciting being a partner, because he knows about it as much as you do. It's like a whole new thing to play with. So as a partner it's quite nice, um, because you're kind of in a level place on what gets him off, what makes him happy.

For these partners, emotional intimacy forms the foundation for the continuity of their desire for their trans partners, and also broadens their capacities to experience new bodily relations of desire, and to experience the changing body itself as a source of eroticism. These insights help to specify some of the ways in which relations of sexuality and desire are particular (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Further, these partners' narratives display a striking openness to and celebration of the shifting forms 'dicks' might take, and the varying ways in which trans men's bodies might function sexually. These narratives thus stand in stark contrast to the narrow and phallogocentric definitions of sexual function characterizing discourses about masculine bodies in other contexts, including the medical and broader cultural discourses about intersex bodies, and about erectile (dys)function and the use of Viagra (Karakis, 2008; Loe, 2004; Mamo and Fishman, 2001).

Other partners focus directly on how their attraction to their partners' changing bodies complicates their general patterns of attraction or their understanding of their sexual identities. One video respondent, Cherise, says:

Considering that I'm a lesbian, I definitely had to be in love with you . . . I had to be in love with you to love those changes about you,

because, had I not known you before, it would have been a little bit more difficult for me to accept those kind of things, 'cause I'm not attracted to men.

And another partner, Shannon, writes on her blog:

I don't understand how it is that this man, guy, who grabbed my heart and soul and body as a female, is still able to give my butterflies butterflies. His body right now, turns me on. The thought of his body as a male, turns me on. The thought of him covered in hair makes me want to run my hands and my naked body through it. The thought of him waxed or hairless makes me need to shift in my chair. Things that in or on other people do not hold my interest, or make me uncomfortable or I just don't like, when I consider them on him, make me all hot and bothered!

Whereas Cherise and Shannon frame their desires for their partners as contradictions to their more general patterns of attraction, an interviewee, Rob, conveys that his sexual experiences with a previous trans partner expanded his views on what bodily relations can be understood as gay sex (see Edelman and Zimman, 2014; Lee, 2001):

It was never put to me that my penetrating somebody in that way could be gay sex, but as soon as I started to do that with my first partner, I was like, this is very gay sex, I don't know of a way to think of this other than as gay sex I like the fact that that's opened me up to sort of potentials I sort of had some first times in a way that I didn't expect to be having, and discovered more erotic potential that I didn't know was there . . .

These partners all continue to understand themselves through categories of sexual identity (even as they complicate the meaning of these categories); in this regard, their narratives contrast with Helen, the partner whom I discuss in the introduction and who suggests that intimate couples 'transcend' sexual labels. Yet, together these narratives reinforce the idea that intimate bonds serve to open up space for the emergence of new bodily relations of desire, including desire for bodily changes as well as sexual acts one might otherwise find undesirable.

Some partners express concern over whether they will continue to be attracted to their partners as their bodies change. Yet, these partners tend to downplay the relevance of pure sexual attraction to these

concerns, and instead frame them as fears about their partners changing as people. In discussing how she is dealing with her partner's recent top surgery, one blogger, Wendy, writes:

Let's just say [coming to terms with the surgery has] been difficult. It's not that I'm so into breasts that I can't live without them . . . I think it's more about being with someone who is essentially altering who they are.

Another partner, Julie, speaks in a YouTube video about her initial reaction to the possibility of her partner having chest surgery:

I am gonna admit, when we were first together and he first came out, I did not want him to get top surgery at all. I did not want him to get top surgery because I was afraid that him doing so would change who he was as a person and change into someone I didn't like . . . I didn't want to lose the person I viewed as my girlfriend for two years prior to this.

And Stephanie foregrounds 'attraction' in discussing her concerns in a YouTube video, but demonstrates that her attraction to her partner is inseparable from her intimate connection to him as a person. She says:

My one big concern is the attraction thing. Everyone I've talked to has said that it's not unreasonable of me to be questioning whether or not I'm still gonna be attracted to him once he starts testosterone, and I'm totally nervous for it because I know I'm dating this really sexy, awesome, funny boy, and I'm just scared testosterone's gonna change that. And I don't know if I'm gonna like waking up to some big hairy hormonal boy thing with smelly pee every single morning.

Joanne, an interviewee, says she worried over the possibility of the loss of hearing the voice to which she has grown accustomed say, 'I love you.' Another interviewee, Megan, says she worried over whether her partner would look like himself if he underwent surgery to masculinize his facial features, though she qualifies this worry by adding that she was *not* worried about losing her attraction for him. These narratives demonstrate how bodily change is never simply reducible to material changes such as the size and contours of body parts, or the pitch of a voice, but always entangled with how the body signifies the self.

Conclusion

Through my analysis of partners' experiences of trans men's changing bodies, this article challenges popular and medical understandings of trans bodies which reduce them to parts. The materiality of trans men's bodies, as experienced by their intimate partners, goes far beyond the presence or absence of particular body parts, and is inseparable from partners' understanding of who trans men are as people. I do not aim to produce generalizable findings, but instead document some of the complex ways in which intimate bonds, as well as broader social, economic, and technological factors, shape how the body is experienced as an object of desire among this particular group of trans men and their partners. These individuals are predominantly white, middle-class, young, highly educated, and located in the US, and are in established partnerships that have spanned trans men's transitions; future research might explore how trans bodies (including trans women's bodies) are experienced within other social and sexual contexts.

My findings center on two main aspects of partners' experiences: how partners overcome fears that trans men will change as people as they transition, and how partners experience desire in relation to trans men's changing bodies. Although partners fear that testosterone and other bodily changes might change who trans men are as people, they discover that they are able to continue to understand trans men as essentially the same people through their transitions. The essence of who trans men are as people is not simply given, however, but rather involves partners' social and material efforts to maintain their view of trans men's essential personhood. Partners are also able to sustain or increase their sexual attraction for trans men's bodies as they change, even in the face of bodily changes they might find unattractive in other contexts. Their sexual attraction is not reducible to desire for generic body parts, but is instead responsive to trans men's self-image. The particularity (Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Salamon, 2010) of their intimate bonds and histories with their partners thus allows for the emergence of new bodily relations of desire.

Although these trans men might be positioned as 'normative' within some discourses about trans embodiment, their gender transitions, as lived out within their intimate relationships, challenge a number of hegemonic conceptions about gender, sexuality, and desire.

Partners' fears about how testosterone might impact trans men's emotions and ability to communicate are rooted in broader constructs and stereotypes of masculinity, yet partners find that these discourses do not fully determine who trans men become. And in understanding trans men as essentially the same people through transition, they delink conceptions of essential personhood from gender. At the same time, partners find that their sexual identities, or their patterns of attraction, are not predictive of their desires for trans men, but that they are able to enjoy new desires within these established intimate contexts. Partners' narratives also expand ideas about which bodies can be understood as masculine, and disrupt the idea that the masculinity or femininity of the body can be reduced to the presence or absence of generic sex organs. Partners experience breasts as 'there but not there' in relation to trans men's own body image, and their narratives expand conceptions of the morphology and functionality of phalluses. These partners' narratives thus challenge the idea that the masculinity of the body is given, instead demonstrating how the masculine body materializes within embodied relations of desire.

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Notes

1. All names (including those of interviewees, YouTube contributors bloggers, and their trans partners) have been changed.
2. I use 'trans' throughout the text, as opposed to many possible alternative terms (such as transgender, transsexual, transexual, or trans*), because it is the descriptor most commonly used by the partners in the study, as well as the trans men themselves.
3. One notable exception to this general finding was one interviewee, Sheila, who defines her lesbian identity on the basis of attraction to 'female genitals' and said that she would find it unacceptable if her

- partner had genital surgery. This interviewee later reported the dissolution of her partnership (for reasons unknown to me).
4. Exceptions to this trend include a couple of clinical studies (Brown, 2010; Nyamora, 2004) that address the relationship between trans men's body modifications and partners' sexual desire more directly, as well as one study (Pfeffer, 2008) concerning how body dysphoria is interpersonally constituted in relationships between trans men and lesbian partners.
 5. Merleau-Ponty (1968) and others (see Irigaray, 1993 [1984]) theorize touch in particular as a sensory experience that involves more fluid relations between subject and object than visual modes of experience.
 6. In total, the experiences of 79 partners of trans men have been analyzed for this study (11 interview participants, 66 video respondents, and 4 bloggers; 2 of the bloggers are also video respondents), assuming that no interview participants were also YouTube or blog contributors, which to the best of my knowledge is true. The amount of data collected from each participant varies, due to the different sources utilized.
 7. One interviewee volunteered for the study to speak about a past relationship that ended for reasons unrelated to transition. Other interviewees spoke about current relationships; one spoke about past relationships with trans men in addition to his current relationship with a trans man. I am unaware of the current status of most of the relationships, though I am aware of one partnership that has ended, as noted above.
 8. Following Tompkins (2011), who writes about TmatesFTM and TransScribersFTM, I use the real names for these YouTube channels, as the channels are oriented at least in part to educating the public, and are publicly available (though I do use pseudonyms for the channel contributors themselves).
 9. On TmatesFTM, I analyzed videos on Lower Surgery, Physical Attributes, Testosterone, Top Surgery, and Sex; on FTMSweethearts, I analyzed videos on Maintaining Attraction after T, T Expectations, T Specifics, and Surgery; and on TransScribersFTM I reviewed videos on Surgery and Testosterone. The total number of videos analyzed in each category ranged from 6 to over 25.
 10. See Brown (2010) for more discussion of how partners of trans men with a history of sexual abuse respond to trans men's transitions.
 11. For work on trans men and voice change, see Lal Zimman (2010, 2013, 2015). Other important work on gender performativity and the materiality of voice includes Schlichter (2011).
 12. Though most interviewees and video respondents said that transition did not alter their trans partners' essential selves, it is important to note

that this common experience likely reflects the specificity of my sample (i.e. partners who have stayed with trans men through transition), and that there are exceptions. For example, one interviewee, Alex (to whom I refer without pronouns, at Alex's request) says that Alex's partner has become a different person through transition, and wonders whether the relationship will last.

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