

Coming to Terms with Transgenderism and Transsexuality

MOST NON-TRANS PEOPLE are unfamiliar with the words that we in the transgender community use to describe ourselves, our experiences, and our most pressing issues. Books and websites that discuss transgenderism and transsexuality often include some kind of glossary, where these terms are laid out and defined in a nice, orderly, alphabetical fashion. However, a potential problem with the glossary approach is that it gives the impression that all of these transgender-related words and phrases are somehow written in stone, indelibly passed down from generation to generation. This is most certainly not the case. Many of the terms used these days to describe transgender people did not exist a decade ago. Conversely, many of the terms that were commonly used a decade ago are now considered to be out of fashion, outdated, or even offensive to many people in the transgender community. Even the terms that are used frequently today are regularly disputed, as individual transgender people may define words in a slightly different manner or have aesthetic or political preferences for certain words over others. So in lieu of a

glossary, I will use this chapter to define many of the transgender-specific terms used throughout the book and to explain why I chose these particular words and phrases rather than others.

It is difficult to talk about people who are transsexual or transgender without first defining the words “sex” and “gender.” “Sex” commonly refers to whether a person is physically female and/or male. Because the physical traits that we most often take into account when describing “sex” are biological in origin (e.g., sex chromosomes, hormones, reproductive systems, genitals, and so forth), there is a tendency to see sex as being a “natural” aspect of gender. However, this is not quite the case. Cultural expectations and assumptions play a large role in shaping how we determine and consider sex. For example, in our culture, such assumptions are very genital-centric: A person’s sex is assigned at birth based on the presence or absence of a penis. Thus, our genitals play a far more important role in determining our legal sex than do our chromosomes (which in most cases are never actually examined) or our reproductive capacity. After all, a woman can have a hysterectomy, or a man can have a vasectomy, without changing or nullifying their legal sex. Indeed, the fact that we even have a “legal” sex demonstrates that society greatly shapes our understanding of sex. Thus, throughout this book, I will use the word “sex” primarily to refer to a person’s physical femaleness and/or maleness, but I will also sometimes use it to refer to the social and legal classes that are associated with one’s physical sex.

The word “gender” is regularly used in a number of ways. Most commonly, it’s used in a manner that’s indistinguishable from “sex” (i.e., to describe whether a person is physically, socially, and legally male and/or female). Other people use the word “gender”

to describe a person’s gender identity (whether they identify as female, male, both, or neither), their gender expression and gender roles (whether they act feminine, masculine, both, or neither), or the privileges, assumptions, expectations, and restrictions they face due to the sex others perceive them to be. Because of the many meanings infused into it, I will use the word “gender” in a broad way to refer to various aspects of a person’s physical or social sex, their sex-related behaviors, the sex-based class system they are situated within, or (in most cases) some combination thereof.

Now that we understand “sex” and “gender,” we can begin to consider the word *transgender*, which is perhaps one of the most confusing and misunderstood words in the English language. While the word originally had a more narrow definition, since the 1990s it has been used primarily as an umbrella term to describe those who defy societal expectations and assumptions regarding femaleness and maleness; this includes people who are transsexual (those who live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth), intersex (those who are born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of female or male), and genderqueer (those who identify outside of the male/female binary), as well as those whose gender expression differs from their anatomical or perceived sex (including crossdressers, drag performers, masculine women, feminine men, and so on). I will also sometimes use the synonymous term *gender-variant* to describe all people who are considered by others to deviate from societal norms of femaleness and maleness.

The far-reaching inclusiveness of the word “transgender” was purposely designed to accommodate the many gender and sexual minorities who were excluded from the previous feminist and gay

rights movements. At the same time, its broadness can be highly problematic in that it often blurs or erases the distinctiveness of its constituents. For example, while male crossdressers and transsexual men are both male-identified transgender people, these groups face a very different set of issues with regards to managing their gender difference. Similarly, drag queens and transsexual women generally have very different experiences and perspectives regarding gender, despite the fact that they are often confused with one another by mainstream society.

Thus, the best way to reconcile the nebulous nature of the word is to recognize that it is primarily a political term, one that brings together disparate classes of people to fight for the common goal of ending all discrimination based on sex/gender variance. While useful politically, *transgender* is too vague of a word to imply much commonality between individual people's identities, life experiences, or understanding of gender.

Another point that is often overlooked in discussions about transgenderism is that many individuals who fall under the transgender umbrella choose not to identify with the term. For example, many intersex people reject the term because their condition is about physical sex (not gender) and the primary issues they face (e.g., nonconsensual "normalizing" medical procedures during infancy or childhood) differ greatly from those of the greater transgender community.¹ Similarly, many transsexuals disavow the term because of its anti-transsexual roots or because they feel that the transgender movement tends to privilege those identities, actions, and appearances that most visibly "transgress" gender norms.² This tendency renders invisible the fact that many of us struggle more with issues related to our physical femaleness or maleness than we

do with our expressions of femininity or masculinity. Throughout this book, I will use the word *trans* to refer to people who (to varying degrees) struggle with a subconscious understanding or intuition that there is something "wrong" with the sex they were assigned at birth and/or who feel that they should have been born as or wish they could be the other sex. (It should be noted that some people use the word "trans" differently, as a synonym or abbreviation for the word *transgender*). For many trans people, the fact that their appearances or behaviors may fall outside of societal gender norms is a very real issue, but one that is often seen as secondary to the cognitive dissonance that arises from the fact that their *subconscious sex* does not match their physical sex. This *gender dissonance* is usually experienced as a kind of emotional pain or sadness that grows more intense over time, sometimes reaching a point where it can become debilitating.

There are many different strategies that trans people may use to ease their gender dissonance. Perhaps the most common one is trying to suppress or deny one's subconscious sex. Others may allow their subconscious sex to come to the surface occasionally, for example through either crossdressing or role-playing. Still others may come to see themselves as *bigendered* (having a mixture of both femininity and masculinity and/or femaleness and maleness), *gender-fluid* (moving freely between genders), or *genderqueer* (identifying outside of the male/female gender binary). And those of us who make the choice to live as the sex other than the one we were assigned at birth are commonly called *transsexuals*.

Perhaps the most underacknowledged issue with regard to the transgender community—and one that is a continuing source of both confusion and contention—is the fact that many of the above

strategies and identities that trans people gravitate toward in order to relieve their gender dissonance are also shared by people who do not experience any discomfort with regards to their subconscious and physical sex. For example, some male-bodied crossdressers spend much of their lives wishing they were actually female, while others see their crossdressing as simply a way to express a feminine side of their personalities. While many drag artists view themselves primarily as entertainers or enjoy performing and parodying gender stereotypes, some trans people gravitate toward drag because it provides them with a rare opportunity to express aspects of their subconscious sex in a socially sanctioned setting. And while many trans people identify as genderqueer because it helps them make sense of their own experiences of living in a world where their understanding of themselves differs so greatly from the way they are perceived by society, other people identify as genderqueer because, on a purely intellectual level, they question the validity of the binary gender system.

Thus, not only do transgender people vary in their perspectives and experiences, but individuals within the same transgender subcategory (whether it be crossdresser, drag artist, genderqueer, etc.) may also differ greatly in what drives them to embrace that identity. And while this book primarily focuses on transsexuality, and more specifically on trans women (as that is my experience and perspective), it is not because I believe that transgender people who are not transsexual are any less important or legitimate; their expressions of gender are just as valid as mine and the discrimination they may face as a result of those expressions is just as real. It is also crucial for us to recognize that it is equally valid for a trans person to decide to transition and live as the other sex as it is for them to

instead choose to blur gender boundaries and identify themselves outside the gender binary. There is no one right way to be trans. Each of us simply needs to figure out what works best for us and what allows us to best express who we feel we are.

When discussing transsexuals, it is often necessary to distinguish between those who transition from male to female—who are commonly referred to as *trans women*—and those who transition from female to male—who are called *trans men*. I prefer these terms over others because they acknowledge the lived and self-identified gender of the trans person (i.e., woman or man), while adding the adjective “trans” as a way to describe one particular aspect of that person’s life experience. In other words, “trans woman” and “trans man” function in a way similar to the phrases “Catholic woman” or “Asian man.” Because many trans people choose to relieve their gender dissonance in ways other than transitioning, I will often use the phrases *male-to-female (MTF) spectrum* and *female-to-male (FTM) spectrum* to describe all trans people (regardless of whether they are genderqueer, transsexual, crossdresser, etc.) who experience their gender as being different from or more complex than the gender they were assigned at birth.

Sometimes people have a tendency to dismiss or delegitimize trans women’s and trans men’s gender identities and lived experiences by relegating us to our own unique categories that are separate from “woman” or “man.” This strategy is often adopted by non-trans folks who wish to discuss trans people without ever bringing into question their own assumptions and beliefs about maleness and femaleness. An obvious example of this phenomenon is the prevalence of the terms “she-males,” “he-shes,” and “chicks with dicks” in reference to trans women. Sometimes attempts to *third-sex* or

third-gender trans people are more subtle or subconscious than that, such as when people merge the phrase “trans woman” to make one word, “transwoman,” or use the adjectives MTF and FTM as nouns (for example, “Julia Serano is an MTF.”). I do not identify as a “male-to-female”—I identify as a woman. These attempts to relegate trans people to “third sex” categories not only disregard the profoundly felt gender identity of the transsexual in question, but also ignore the very real experiences that trans person has had being treated as a member of the sex that they have transitioned to.

When discussing transsexuals’ lives, it is important to find words that accurately describe their gendered experiences in both the past and present. Many trans people say they understood themselves to be female or male for most of their lives despite the fact that it wasn’t the sex they were assigned at birth. Therefore, when a trans person transitions, their subconscious sex or gender identity essentially stays the same—rather, it is their physical sex that changes (hence the term *transsexual*). With regards to the trans person’s original sex, I will often use the somewhat clunky phrase *the sex (or gender) they were assigned at birth* to emphasize the nonconsensual nature of how we are raised, socialized, and treated by society on the basis of our physical sex. For convenience, I may also refer to it as their *assigned gender/sex* or (to a lesser extent) their *birth sex*. I may refer to the sex that the trans person has transitioned to as their *preferred sex*, their *identified sex* (to emphasize the fact that it agrees with their gender identity), or their *lived sex* (to emphasize the fact that they now live and experience the world as a member of that sex).

It is common for people to assume that being or becoming a transsexual involves some kind of “sex change operation.”

However, this is not necessarily the case. While some transsexuals undergo numerous medical procedures as part of their physical transitions, others either cannot afford or choose not to undergo such procedures. Indeed, attempts to limit the word “transsexual” to only those who physically transition is not only classist (because of the affordability issue), but objectifying, as it reduces all trans people to the medical procedures that have been carried out on their bodies. For these reasons, I will use the word *transsexual* to describe anyone who is currently, or is working toward, living as a member of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth, regardless of what procedures they may have had. Further, because there are so many different paths that a transsexual person may take toward living in their identified sex, I will use the word *transition* to describe the process of changing one’s lived sex, rather than in reference to any specific medical procedure.

The most common medical procedure for transsexuals to seek out is *hormone replacement therapy*, which involves taking testosterone in the case of trans men, or taking estrogen (and sometimes progesterone) in the case of trans women. These are the same sex hormones that kick in during puberty in all people and they produce many of the same bodily changes in adult transsexuals as they do in adolescents: Some effects are changes in skin complexion and muscle/fat distribution, breast growth in trans women, and deepened voices and facial hair growth in trans men. These hormone-produced body changes are often referred to as *secondary sex characteristics* (to distinguish them from so-called *primary sex characteristics* such as reproductive organs and genitals). Secondary sex characteristics are the cues that we most often use when we classify adults as being either women or men, which explains why hormone

replacement therapy is often sufficient to allow trans people to live unnoticed in their identified sex.

While there are a number of possible surgeries that a trans person may undertake, the one that seems to most capture public imagination is *sex reassignment surgery (SRS)*, which involves reconstruction of the genitals to better match that of the transsexual's identified sex. Some trans people object to the term *SRS* and instead prefer alternatives such as *genital reassignment surgery*, *gender confirmation surgery*, or *bottom surgery* (to contrast it with *top surgery*: the removal or enhancement of breasts). Personally, I am not bothered by the technical name of the surgery so much as I am by the fact that it gets so much attention in the media and the general public. After all, as someone who is not a cardiologist nor has ever had a heart condition, I really don't feel any compelling need to know all of the technical names or hear play-by-play accounts of heart surgeries. Nor do I need to know all of the specific names and doses of chemotherapies in order to be touched by the story of someone who has survived cancer. For this reason, I am rather disturbed by the fact that so many people—who are neither medical professionals nor trans themselves—would want to hear all of the gory details regarding transsexual physical transformations, or would feel that they have any right to ask us about the state of our genitals. It is offensive that so many people feel that it is okay to publicly refer to transsexuals as being “pre-op” or “post-op” when it would so clearly be degrading and demeaning to regularly describe all boys and men as being either “circumcised” or “uncircumcised.”

While the specific details of transsexual-related medical procedures should be readily available for those contemplating sex reassignment, such information is neither relevant nor necessary

for one to understand the experiences and perspectives of trans people. After all, while my physical transition occurred primarily over a period of a year and a half—a mere fraction of my life—what has remained constant and pervasive (both pre-, during, and post-transition) has been the resistance and prejudice that I have faced from those who are not transgender, those who become irrationally uncomfortable or disturbed by my gender expression and/or female identity, and those who presume that their identified gender is more natural or valid than my own. For this reason, I believe that one cannot begin to fully understand transsexuality without thoroughly examining and critiquing the prejudices and presumptions of the non-transsexual majority. So although I will be discussing transsexuals throughout this book, I will also be spending a great deal of time discussing the beliefs and attitudes common among cissexuals—that is, people who have only ever experienced their subconscious sex and physical sex as being aligned. Similarly, people who are not transgender may be described as being *cisgender* (although I will be using this term less often, since the focus of this book is on transsexual women rather than the transgender population as a whole).³ I prefer these terms, but I occasionally use the synonymous terms *non-transsexual* and *non-transgender*.

Some might feel that all of these trans- and gender-related terms I've introduced are overwhelming or confusing. And others, particularly those in the fields of gender and queer studies, might dismiss much of this language as contributing to a “reverse discourse”—that is, by describing myself as a transsexual and creating trans-specific terms to describe my experiences, I am simply reinforcing the same distinction between transsexuals and cissexuals that has marginalized me in the first place. My response to both

of these arguments is the same: I do not believe that transsexuals and cissexuals are inherently different from one another. But the vastly different ways in which we are perceived and treated by others, and the way those differences impact our unique physical and social experiences, lead many transsexuals to see and understand gender very differently than our cissexual counterparts. And while transsexuals are extremely familiar with cissexual perspectives of gender (as they dominate in our culture), most cissexuals remain largely unfamiliar with trans perspectives. Using only words that cissexuals are familiar with in order to describe my gendered experiences would be similar to a musician only choosing words that nonmusicians understand when describing music. It can be done, but something crucial would surely be lost in the translation. Just as musicians cannot fully explain their reaction to a particular song without bringing up concepts such as “minor key” or “time signature,” there are certain trans-specific words and ideas that will appear throughout this book that are crucial for me to use in order to precisely convey my thoughts and experiences regarding gender. To have an illuminating and nuanced discussion about my experiences and perspectives as a trans woman, we must begin to think in terms of words and ideas that accurately describe that experience.

2

Skirt Chasers: Why the Media Depicts the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels

AS A TRANSSEXUAL WOMAN, I am often confronted by people who insist that I am not, nor can I ever be, a “real woman.” One of the more common lines of reasoning goes something like this: *There’s more to being a woman than simply putting on a dress.* I couldn’t agree more. That’s why it’s so frustrating that people often seem confused because, although I have transitioned to female and live as a woman, I rarely wear makeup or dress in an overly feminine manner.

Despite the reality that there are as many types of trans women as there are women in general, most people believe that all trans women are on a quest to make ourselves as pretty, pink, and passive as possible. While there are certainly some trans women who buy into mainstream dogma about beauty and femininity, others are outspoken feminists and activists fighting against all gender stereotypes. But you’d never know it by looking at the popular media, which tends to assume that all transsexuals are male-to-female, and that all trans women want to achieve stereotypical femininity.