Where Did We Go Wrong?

Feminism and Trans Theory: tow teams on the same side

Existing feminist oppositions to transsexual and transgender people, the medical processes they undertake and the knowledge and understanding they have of gender and sex, like all oppositions have a history. I want to start by framing this presentation in a small piece of my personal history. Like all trans people speaking on almost anything related to what trans is, the subjective experience always becomes the primary reference point.

In 1974, as a member of Manchester's "Radical Lesbian Collective" I attended the Women’s Liberation Conference which was held in Edinburgh. The conference was an incredibly stormy affair. Loud and heated arguments took place around issues such as "why were men providing child care in the conference crèche?" and "how could women claim they were women-identified women if their sexual or homemaking partner was a man?" All of these discussions took place around a backdrop of the fundamental ideological differences between Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and Radical Separatist (lesbian) feminism. At that time, and through my membership of the Lesbian Collective, I was firmly placed in the camp of radical separatism.

I believed – and still do believe – that there are values inherent in the complex understandings that arise out of women's collective and individual histories which are better values in terms of informing people about ways of living and being. Those better values, if only articulated (through the process of women's consciousness raising) would lead to the deconstruction of the power inherent in the patriarchal structures that dictate gender and sex roles. That deconstruction project could only take place if women had a separate space, a place from which to speak and to formulate a new understanding both of patriarchal and heterosexist oppression and the oppositional tactics needed to combat that oppression. As such, I had no problem with my positioning as a radical separatist. Liberal feminism merely sought equality but on men's terms – it would not introduce a new set of values to the world. Marxist feminism simply viewed patriarchal oppression as being the revolutionary overturning of the economic structures that had made women members of the caste of "slave", but even with the revolution and the discovery of women's power – it would however retain women as the partners of men, not as people with a separate and distinct voice.

When we returned to Manchester after the Women's Liberation Conference, I announced to the other collective members that the conference had confirmed for me that I was in fact a man (this was 1974 remember). I expected to be ousted from the collective and to be ostracised - not least because I was "betraying women, by coping out, escaping my oppression and becoming an apparent oppressor". Ironically the values that arose out of belonging to the slave caste of woman, and the untouchable sub-group of lesbian woman at that, were to be my saving grace. I was listened to, I was given gifts of shirts and ties out of the back of "formerly identified butch" women's wardrobes. I was taken to clubs where I would be able to meet other people who identified as I did – as trans - as a person whose self was not dictated by the labels attached at birth to genital morphology. My separate and distinct voice was not only heard but it was listened to, and a new set of values was followed. My belief in radical separatism was confirmed – for the time being.

Raymond and the Transsexual Person

However, with the publication in 1979 of Janice Raymond's The Transsexual Empire, feminist theory and praxis was suddenly given a framework in which to, "See(n) transsexuals as possessing something less than agency (in the words of Sandy Stone, a lesbian feminist transsexual woman vilified by Raymond) ... transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert and destroy 'true' women" (Stone, in Epstein and Straub, 1991, p. 294).

Raymond made three arguments for use by feminists to condemn the transsexual woman (n.b. transsexual men didn't really exist in 1979, and probably still don’t) that are undoubtedly very powerful:
Firstly: "Transsexuals are living out two patriarchal myths: single parenthood by the father (male mothering) and the making of woman according to man's image". (Raymond, 1979: xx)

In other words the process of transsexual "medical rebirth" is a process of mythic deception, which was one response, by a male power base, to the second wave of feminism in America in the 1960s.

Secondly: Transsexuals are one result of a "socio-political program", controlled and implemented by the medico-legal hierarchies of, and on behalf of, a patriarchal hegemony which has used them: "to colonise feminist identification, culture, politics and sexuality" (Raymond, 1979: xx).

Not only do they construct women out of men, but just as the androgyous man assumes the trappings of femininity when he identifies as, and is reconstructed as a transsexual, so: "the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist assumes for himself the role and behaviour of the feminist" (Raymond, 1979: 100).

Thus the transsexual is created as an alternative to biological women who are becoming obsolete. In this way the medical aspect of the patriarchal empire does not just attack women; it goes further so that their sense of self is being penetrated in every way. Women's identities, spirits and sexuality are all invaded. The physical loss of a penis does not mean the loss of an ability to penetrate.

Thirdly: In this context, Raymond made her most damning statement: "All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves ... Transsexuals merely cut off the most obvious means of invading women, so that they seem non-invasive." (Raymond, 1979: 104)

The discourse of rape is a subtle one of possession, in particular of the flesh of women. When a man penetrates a woman, he is often referred to as "possessing" that woman. Raymond's constructed transsexual woman who identifies as a lesbian feminist exhibits: "the attempt to possess women in a bodily sense while acting out the images into which men have moulded women" (Raymond, 1979: 99).

Women were in 1979, therefore justified in thinking transsexual people were not innocent victims of oppression arising out of patriarchy's controlled gender and sex roles (which would have been one alternative reading), but rather were co-conspirators in an attempt by men to possess them and to remake them in a mould that suits them.

The historical location of Raymond's book places it in the history of sex-role, early feminist theory and from it emerged a construction of the transsexual person in which they are no longer merely a medico-legal construction, but they become part of the story, and mechanism, of patriarchal oppression. This discourse, documented by Raymond (she did not invent it single handedly) reproduces the power relations that are themselves inherent in radical feminist separatist theory. That some values and some knowledge are better ... and others are inherently flawed.

The Effects of Raymond

Raymond's discourse, I would argue, has had far-reaching ideological effects:

- it promotes radical separatism as the only viable alternative to the patriarchal hegemony, because the patriarchy is always involved in the treacherous act of building the Trojan Horse [containing the transsexual woman] (and Liberal feminism and Marxist feminism will always open the gate to the horse);
- it supports the notion of separatism in that it sanctions an "invisible" oppression of transsexual people by women. It allows women to become dominant in telling their narrative about their past in order to justify and promote the use of sex-role theory, and, in assuming a homogeneity in women's voices, it subsumes any other discourse about gender and sex. In this way the transsexual person's story of gender oppression and a search for identity is silenced.
- It assumes that biology is destiny, despite all that feminism seems to say in opposition to this in terms of the pre-determination of sex and gender roles. What is anatomically observable - the possession of a penis or a vagina at the birth of a child – what is viewed as "natural" becomes the dictator of the socially constructed gender role.

The Relationship of Trans People With Feminism

The reason that I wanted to talk about this is that being like all trans people I was obligated to explore the complex pedagogies that informed myself.

Initially, I was compelled to do so with practising clinical psychologists. It was part of my "treatment" – a way in which others could actually justify allowing me to do to myself things they felt very uncomfortable about – a point I'll come back to presently. Fifteen years later, I undertook this exploration by default, when I embarked on reading the work of academic psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists for my doctorate.

In both circumstances I felt washed out, mangled and hung out to dry. What did I discover about myself – well:

Between the faults of my over bearing father and weak mother - or depending upon whom you read, my overbearing mother and weak father, I should have certainly known that I:

- was escaping my disgust at my lesbianism; or
- my fear of economic dependency; or
- just simply my inherent failure to conform to my gender role; or
ongoing discussion as to whether the medical profession should take a diagnostic or merely enabling role for those people who actively

Firstly:

The transgendered community have not attempted to avoid these difficulties; rather they have tackled them head on.

Secondly:

1991, as cited in the 1994 preface to the reprinting of Raymond's "Transsexual Empire").

Thirdly:

repressed homosexuality being appeased through reassignment surgery, or heterosexuality (in their new sex-role) was imposed on

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academic voice they might have, in particular with feminist theorists.

Fourthly: transgendered people have not been allowed either objectivity or sexuality. Objectivity was lost because of the combination of

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role change they might undertake to accommodate their gender. Sexuality was lost as it was constructed for them in the form of

repressed homosexuality being appeased through reassignment surgery, or heterosexuality (in their new sex-role) was imposed on

them by the medical profession in order to justify what was seen as a "medical collusion with an unattainable fantasy" (The Lancet,
1991, as cited in the 1994 preface to the reprinting of Raymond's "Transsexual Empire").

The transgendered community have not attempted to avoid these difficulties; rather they have tackled them head on.

Firstly: the post-modernist acknowledgement of a multiplicity of voices has been adapted to theoretical stances and there is an ongoing discussion as to whether the medical profession should take a diagnostic or merely enabling role for those people who actively

And so on and so forth - a diarrhoea of theories, none of which fit my, not fantastic but also not awful, experience of childhood and life. However what I did know, on both occasions, was that trans people had to "pass" the "examinations" of the psycho - "experts", who acted as the gatekeepers to the medical professionals who would provide the hormones and surgery that I knew were essential to not only enhance my life, but in order to keep me alive. As such the psycho - experts became the enemy I had to either persuade to believe me or to defeat (regardless of whether they believed me or not) in order to enter through the gateway. Yet – I also discovered that the psycho - experts were contained and controlled by both the overarching assumptions of their own disciplines, and the schools of theory they belonged to within those disciplines: that it is possible to find scientific evidence to "truths" which have some sort of universality, but that that universality depends upon the paradigms of the theoretical understanding of the nature of "human-ness" and its interaction with society, and culture. Where was feminism in all of this? In reality it has been moving forward from "Raymond's objectivist view of what feminism is.

As Margot Llombart outlines in her chapter in the 1997 collection; Deconstructing Feminist Psychology: "Feminist critical contributions to psychology have played a crucial role in the process of unmasking the objectivist fallacy of psychology. They have ensured that the second part of that equation is now included – that is that there is a social dimension, which had in the past been driven into oblivion by the positivist project, present in the production of psychological knowledge. Feminist psychologists have been instrumental, just as feminists have also been in other fields, in unmasking the effects of power, domination and exclusion. In psychology feminists have been instrumental in criticising the classical model of the production of knowledge, and the masculine ideology in most scientific practices. Further they have shown that most 'general' theories about human beings are nothing more than fictions."

So Where Do We Go From Here?

Feminists when faced with trans people find themselves between the devil and deep blue sea. They now see that general theories are nothing more than fictions. But how does this pan out in real life?

Transgendered people as writers and speakers used to have to be primarily apologists. However the time has come when we are being "poor oppressed women pushed into self-mutilation by patriarchal oppression".

The transsexual/transgender community through its own writings and theorising has attempted to offer an "insider's" exploration of the ways in which trans people view gender issues and the use of transsexual and transvestite iconography in particular. However the trans community acknowledges that it is not, however, a clear cut issue. Trans theory has amongst its predecessors the work of neo-Marxists and feminist theorists. These schools of thought have had some difficulty in reconciling transgender behaviour with their political stances, as can be seen by the work of Janice Raymond or for example Sheila Jeffries whose radical feminist viewpoint cites trans men as being "poor oppressed women pushed into self-mutilation by patriarchal oppression".

Firstly: any discussion of gender by the transgendered community has been hampered by the medical discourse surrounding transgendered behaviour which makes transgendered people out to be simultaneously self-interested and decidedly balmy.

Secondly: they have been hampered by social and legal restrictions which have made it very difficult publicly to come-out as transgendered, and which further add another aspect of self-interest to any work they might do on gender issues.

Thirdly: Janice Raymond's thesis in The Transsexual Empire, the Making of the She-male (1979) discredited for a long time any academic voice they might have, in particular with feminist theorists.

Fourthly: transgendered people have not been allowed either objectivity or sexuality. Objectivity was lost because of the combination of the other three factors; also, if they questioned gender and sex-roles, they were put in the invidious position of having to justify any sex-role change they might undertake to accommodate their gender. Sexuality was lost as it was constructed for them in the form of repressed homosexuality being appeased through reassignment surgery, or heterosexuality (in their new sex-role) was imposed on them by the medical profession in order to justify what was seen as a "medical collusion with an unattainable fantasy" (The Lancet, 1991, as cited in the 1994 preface to the reprinting of Raymond's "Transsexual Empire").
Secondly: the trans community has consistently fought through the courts and the legislature not for the right to marry or the right to disappear, but for the right to be trans and yet to be afforded what others are afforded; relationship protection, personal safety, anti-discrimination legislation, access to appropriate health care and treatment.

Thirdly: transgenderists have tackled the problems raised by radical feminism by continuously asking for answers to the very awkward question. If there is an insistence upon the existence of and resultant oppression of binary sex and gender roles then you cannot exclude all trans people from experiencing any of that. For example trans men and trans women challenged the "Womyn born Womyn" policy of the 1994 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival by asking for their right for either group to enter the festival.

Fourthly: transgendered people have questioned the whole notion of objectivity - they do not try to claim it and instead they have built upon the tradition the community has of autobiographical writing to give a voice to their self-acknowledged subjectivity. As to sexuality, they have begun to reclaim it. Through the work begun by gay, lesbian or bi activists they have started to come-out. The argument is simple: if you can acknowledge in yourself that what makes a person is what takes place between the ears and not between the legs, then a trans person is in a privileged position to know that sexuality is a movable and mutable force within us all.

Default assumptions are (as they always have been (see Jason Cromwell's recent book on this Transmen and F.T.M.s: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities)] one of the biggest problems facing the acceptance of the trans community's contribution to any academic work or, for that matter, any acceptance at all. There is the first assumption that females do not become men or males become women: they become pastiches, surgical constructions of imaginary masculinities or femininities. The default assumption that underlies any notion of a transgendered existence is that gender is immutable and it is fixed through biological constraints, and social construction merely affects any representation that the biological may take. This is also the default assumption of feminism - biology is destiny, no matter that in the same breath we say it is not.

Transgendered activists and academics are attempting to deal with the volatile concept of identification, but it is against all the odds: the rigidity of a set of default assumptions concerning sex-roles that pervades all discussion of gender - that the two have an incorruptible sameness that makes them all pervasive. Yet gender and sex are fundamentally different for the transgendered community. They face the everyday reality of that difference in their lives, and attempts to reconcile it have led to it being challenged in unanticipated ways. Many have had to move on from seeking any biological basis for their state of being; all searching for aetiology has been unsuccessful. Any aetiology that has been proposed, whether social or biological, has been torn down by the mass of exceptions. It has been accepted that seeking aetiology is a fruitless occupation as the multiplicity of possible factors increases. And even if it were found and there were possible points of interception, would the "cure" be wanted?

Expressing the move to a theory in which gender and sex roles are clearly separated (at least for a large number of people) and what that means to the modernist view of gender theory is a challenge the transgendered community is not ignoring, nor is it prepared to come up with trite self-serving answers. Challenging their own sense of self, looking inwards to find who they are, using the process of autobiography that they know so well, is producing some very interesting answers which challenge the very binary structure of the complacent world in which gender was invented, and by which it has become obsessed. After all trans people did not invent gender. Gender is a merely a word to signify a concept of the human imagination that belongs within and supports the foundations of a patriarchal heterosexist hegemony. Feminists can take heart from the fact that within the trans community there is no hidden answer as to what gender is. However there are answers to how it is experienced and what those experiences mean.

As a "born female bodied" person I was, in 1997, the first "man" to be asked to edit the Journal of Gender Studies. The Journal is the voice of British academic socialist feminism with its roots entrenched in both Marxist and radical separatist feminism. I wrote in my editorial to the "Transgendered Edition" (Journal of Gender Studies, November 1998): "Trans has problematised all the categories and all the words of sex, gender and sexualities. No amount of trying is ever going to clearly pin them down again, they have become linguistic signposts which we now know are often pointing down the wrong road. The audible gasp when I asked 'am I the first man to edit the journal?' was what I expected, because the acknowledgement of the questions has to arise before we can even start to formulate the answers. I have no idea whether I had been asked to edit because - and here I give as many choices as I can think of, and my responses to those choices:

- I am a woman really but deluded in thinking I am a man, therefore as a woman I can edit the journal. (This is still the predominate medical model of the transsexual condition. It is a mental health problem which as yet psychotherapy or other forms of mental health treatment mechanisms have been unable to cure, so medicine colludes with the person's delusions by performing "sex-change" surgery, which has, at least, been shown to enhance the individuals social functioning. Do the journal editor's follow this school of thought? - I hope not.)
- or I am a woman really and an acceptable performance of masculinity by a woman, because I acknowledge it as performance, by being out about my trans status (As Riki Anne Wilchins would put it "Trans-identity is not a natural fact. Rather it is a political category we are forced to occupy when we do certain things with our bodies" Performance is a theory which dictates people and who they are as much as biological essentialism does. It removes any sense of personal choice and freedom. I would agree with Wilchins, it is a category placed by others because I choose my freedoms.)
- or I am a woman really and my oppression as a woman lies in my childhood experiences as a girl and my experience as a woman who lives as a transsexual man (Undoubtedly my childhood was seen by others as being a girl's childhood, but would the second part of this statement be different if I was not "out" as being a transsexual man. Does it rely upon it position of open oppression? However it was this viewpoint that was to enable the radical separatist women's group of Sussex University to invite me to
Professor Stephen Whittle (O.B.E.) was born in 1955 in Manchester, United Kingdom. He is a prominent figure in the field of gender studies, known for his contributions to feminist theory and transgender rights.

His work explores the intersection of gender and identity, challenging traditional binaries and advocating for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to understanding difference. Whittle's research and activism have been influential in promoting gender diversity and understanding the experiences of those who identify outside of traditional gender norms.

Throughout his career, Whittle has been involved in various projects aimed at advancing the rights and recognition of transgender individuals. His work has been widely published and recognized, contributing to the ongoing dialogue on gender identity and rights.

References


Stephen Whittle
Kingdom. He was the middle child of the five children in his family and suffered from rickets in early childhood. In 1966 his mother, being concerned at how different he was from his sisters, entered him in the examination for Withington Girl's School. Being one of the highest scorers in the city in the exam that year, he received a scholarship to attend. It was during his time at Withington Girl's School that he started reading medical books. He knew that he was romantically attached to other girls at school – he never told them, and so his love was not reciprocated – but he also knew that he was sexually attracted to men. On top of that was a strong desire to be a man, to grow a beard and to have a hairy chest. He had read articles about people like Della Aleksander and April Ashley who had had a sex change. In 1972, at the age of sixteen, whilst visiting his doctor about a sore throat he read about a female to male transsexual person.

In 1974 Whittle came out as an F.T.M. transman, after returning from a Women’s Liberation Conference in Edinburgh, which he attended as a member of the Manchester Lesbian Collective. He began hormone replacement therapy in 1975. He has been active in transsexual and transgender communities since the age of twenty when in 1975 he joined the Manchester TV/TS, the first support group for transsexual people in the United Kingdom. In 1979 he joined a former army officer and then royal sculptor, Judy Couzins, a transwoman in the Self Help Association for Transsexuals (SHAFT). In 1989, he founded the U.K’s F.T.M. Network which he coordinated until November 2007. In 1992, along with Mark Rees, the actress Myka Scott and an airline pilot Krystyna Sheffield, he founded and became vice-president of Press for Change, an organisation that works to change the laws and social attitudes surrounding transgender and transsexual lives. Whittle remains as one of the vice-presidents. Whittle underwent phalloplasty surgeries from 2001 to 2003. The Channel 4 documentary *Make Me a Man* followed his life during the surgeries.

Though unable to marry legally in the United Kingdom until the passing of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. He and his partner (now wife), Sarah Rutherford, have four children by artificial insemination.

He has written and spoken extensively on his personal journey, his writings have included, among other things, an article on the ground-breaking transsexual employment discrimination case presided over by the European Court of Justice. In 2005 he was awarded The Sylvia Rivera Award for Transgender Studies by the Centre for Lesbian and Gay Studies for the monograph “Respect and Equality”. In 2007, along with his co-editor, Susan Stryker, he was awarded a Lambda Literary Award for their annotated collection of fifty key historical and contemporary transgender science, political and theory texts - “The Transgender Studies Reader”.

In 2002, Whittle was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis which has become an increasing problem since late 2005, yet he continues in his fulltime university post, and his fight for the human rights of trans people throughout the world. In recent years, he has collaborated with other members; Paisley Currah, Shannon Minter and Alyson Meiselmann, of the World Professional Association of Transgender Health W.P.A.T.H. on amicus briefs to courts in many jurisdictions. In 2007, he was the first non-medical professional and first trans person to become President of W.P.A.T.H.

He is the recipient of the Human Rights Award by the Civil Rights group Liberty, for his commitment and dedication to ensuring the advancement of rights for transsexual people through judicial means in the United Kingdom, Europe, and around the world; he was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) for services to Gender Issues; and was awarded the Virginia Prince Lifetime Achievement Award by the U.S.A’s International Federation for Gender Education.
A Transgender Studies Reader
Author: Stephen Whittle and Susan Stryker
Publisher: Routledge (2006)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0415947091.

From Amazon Books: Transgender studies is the latest area of academic inquiry to grow out of the exciting nexus of queer theory, feminist studies, and the history of sexuality. Because transpeople challenge our most fundamental assumptions about the relationship between bodies, desire, and identity, the field is both fascinating and contentious. The Transgender Studies Reader puts between two covers, fifty influential texts with new introductions by the editors that, taken together, document the evolution of transgender studies in the English-speaking world. By bringing together the voices and experience of transgender individuals, doctors, psychologists and academically-based theorists, this volume will be a foundational text for the transgender community, transgender studies, and related queer theory.

Respect and Equality: Transsexual and Transgender Rights
Author: Stephen Whittle
Publisher: Routledge-Cavendish (2002)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-1859417430.

From Amazon Books: In this fascinating work, theoretical discussions of sex, sexuality, gender and law, and an extensive range of primary and secondary research materials, are combined to provide an insightful analysis into the inadequacies of current law.

The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities
Author: Stephen Whittle
Publisher: South Street Press (2000)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-1902932163.

From goodreads: Transgender has become a cultural obsession. From the high camp of RuPaul to the working class transsexual icon, Hayley of Coronation Street, it pervades our lives. Yet for many it remains a freakish interest on the sidelines. For transsexual and transgender people, though, it is a reality bound up in complexities, legal contradictions, family discord, and a desperate need to explain what it means to be a man or a woman, or neither, or both. Addressing the historical, social, legal and medical issues surrounding this new community, this book throws a light onto the complex issues, clarifying them in a way that all those who think they know what they mean, will be called to question the certainties that gender roles are no longer about.

Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the fin de siecle
Author: Stephen Whittle and Kate More
Publisher: Continuum International Publishing Group (1999)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-0304337774.

From Barnes & Noble: An interdisciplinary work bringing together an international group of transgender writers, this text provides a collection of essays that are central to both academia and activism. Based on academic and "street" experiences, the book addresses the practical issues faced in changing the world view of gender while forcing theory a step forward from limitations of "queer", feminism and postmodernism. In a wide-ranging set of contributions, it addresses our engendered places now and what we can aim for in the future. It evaluates the mechanism we can use to galvanize both the micro theories of gender as a personal experience of oppression and the macro theories of gender as a site of social regulation. The collection aims to take identity politics and reclaim identity for the "self".

The Margins of the City: Gay Men's Urban Lives
Author: Stephen Whittle
Publisher: Ashgate Publishing Group (1994)
I.S.B.N.-13 978-1857422023.

From World of Books: Within cities, gay life has always been marginalized in social, political and cultural terms, even although significant gay places have often been geographically centrally placed. This work looks at the physical and spatial development of gay places over the last twenty-five years in a social context.
The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.