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Are Transsexuals at the Forefront of a Revolution?

... or Just Reinforcing Old Stereotypes About Men and Women?

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On her way to the Second International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy, Susan Stryker had one of

those tiny moments of existential panic (that can bring a whole world into focus. Susan is a pre-operative transsexual, which means that she is taking female hormones and has developed small breasts but still has male genitalia as well as facial hair that she shaves closely and covers with make-up. She has been 'presenting' as a woman fulltime for almost two years, and yet every time she enters a public restroom, choosing more deliberately than most of us the door marked by one stick-figured symbol over another, she instinctively checks for the absence of urinals before feeling safe. It was the kind of discomfort that she always felt in public rest rooms, even when she was living as a man. But in the Dallas Airport on that particular day she was startled when a teenage boy burst into the women's room, then quickly realised he was on taboo turf and tied in embarrassment.

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The havoc that a strictly bipolar system wreaks most directly on transgendered people but also on the rest of us was the subject of the conference in Houston. According to the packet of information I had received, there would be 65 transgendered (both transsexual and cross-dressing) lawyers and activists at the three-day event, held at the Hilton Southwest Hotel. They would participate in workshops in such areas as health, employment, military and personal identification regulations, out of which would come blueprints for further action.

My own interest in transsexualism had begun only two month earlier, when I met Susan Stryker at a gender conference I was covering in San Francisco. Unlike other panellists on transsexualism that day, who were dressed in clothes that instantly signalled their new identity, Susan was wearing what she called her 'radical transsexual-genderfuck-drag' outfit: work boots, black cotton sleeveless t-shirt and ripped-to-the-point-of-shredded jeans over black tights. With her long blond hair, she could easily have 'passed' as a woman, but passing turned out to be the last thing on her mind.

Besides, having taught early American history at the University of San Francisco (her students were surely unique in learning, along with more standard fare, that the current anti-cross-dressing laws in New York originated as an attempt by the state legislature to prevent militant farmers of committing acts of civil disobedience while dressed as American Indians), Susan was also a founding member of a nascent radical civil rights group called Transgender Nation. She saw her 'gender dysphoria', as the medical profession would label it, as a personal quest that pointed the way toward gender liberation for us all.

Gender identity is clearly one of the topics of the 1990s. Half the stories in the newspapers are really about changing perceptions of gender, whether in the guise of gays in the military or dating codes on campus or discrimination in the workplace or the domestic life of the Bobbitts, or any of dozens of other subjects. A recent spate of movies - including *The Crying Game*, *Orlando*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *M. Butterfly*, *House of Angels*, *Farewell my Concubine*, and the top box office hit *Mrs. Doubtfire* - explored transgender themes. So crowded has this transgender bandwagon become that a short time after *Mrs Doubtfire* lost its number one position, it was replaced by another Hollywood comedy that touched on the same theme: *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. In the film's climactic scene, the detective's main antagonist, the local police chief (played by Sean Young), is revealed to be (family entertainment not being what it used to be) a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual with breasts and a penis.

Yet the fact is that Hollywood is really playing cultural catch-up. The list of musicians who engage in some form of gender bending is so extensive that the practice almost seems to be a pre-requisite for stardom: Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Madonna, Boy George, Michael Jackson, Annie Lennox, K.D. Lang, Laurie Anderson, RuPaul and many others (not to mention performers from an older generation, such as Liberace, who is, in this context, one of the seminal figures of our time - or that even more problematic icon, Elvis, the cross-dresser as male sex symbol).

If M.T.V. is where we try out new gender possibilities, old-fashioned TV is where we ridicule them. Hundreds of talk show programs have been devoted to cross-dressers and transsexuals (Donahue in a dress was not one of the more enlightening televised images of

recent years), and there is hardly a gregarious transgendered person who hasn't appeared on at least one of them. (A recent men's support group I attended in San Francisco discussed talk show appearance tips). We laugh at what we fear and what we fear most is the dissolution of personal identity, gender being one of its essential components.

Frankly, before I met Susan Stryker and her group of transsexual friends, I was a pretty typical talk show viewer. I had never thought a lot about gender liberation - or even gender itself much beyond the standard bipolar "me Tarzan, you Jane" sense. Specifically, I had never thought about the distinction between sex and gender; the one, a chromosomal and anatomical 'fact'; the other, more of a mental and social construct.

In the ensuing weeks I read much of the scant literature on transsexualism. In 1953, a Danish physician turned an ex-G.I., named George Jorgensen into Christine in the most widely publicised early sexual reassignment surgery. Since then, the number of post-operative transsexuals has grown into the tens of thousands, with many times that in various stages of gender transition - and of course, an untold number who feel themselves to be transgendered and do nothing about it physically. And while transsexualism is, strictly speaking, a fairly recent phenomenon (a result, largely, of wartime advances in trauma surgery), there have been transgendered individuals in all cultures and mythologies throughout history. (Joan of Arc, far from being the frail-but-feisty maid of orleans, was a six-foot-plus warrior who was burned at the stake more because she refused to stop wearing male clothing than for her role in a regional dynastic struggle). In many cultures such people have been considered to possess numinous powers by virtue of their knowledge of both male and female secrets, and have played honoured roles. For instance, Native American berdache - effeminate men and masculine women who chose to live in opposite gender roles - officiated at important tribal rituals.

The actual cause of transsexualism is hotly disputed by gender researchers, who line up in the familiar nature versus nurture formation, with pre-natal theories of chromosomal irregularities and hormonal imbalances vying with postnatal notions of opposite sex imprinting and family systems of dominant and absent parents.

The conference, half law convention, half transgender support group, proved to be fascinating, as much or more because of the people involved as because of the issues raised. The news in the first workshop on employment law was mostly discouraging. As the workshop moderator, a transsexual lawyer and business woman named Laura Skaer, put it, "Basically, if you're at the stage where you're filing an employment discrimination suit, you've already lost it." No transsexual has ever won such a suit based on gender issues, although that situation could soon change now that Minnesota has passed the first wide-ranging civil rights bill that specifically includes transsexuals. The closest anyone came was a Boeing engineer, whose initial judgement against the company for not letting her dress in feminine clothing or use the women's restroom while still pre-operative was overturned on appeal.

But overall, the event had an upbeat, get-out-of-the-closet tenor. Participants rarely used the medical term 'gender dysphoria' to describe their condition. They said, 'gender gifted', 'gender creative', or 'whole-gendered'. One transsexual announced that she "wasn't gender dysphoric but gender euphoric". Perhaps two-thirds considered themselves transsexuals, almost all male-to-females. The rest were transvestites, often distinguishable because they dressed to the nines, wore more make-up (to cover their beards, since they rarely underwent electrolysis), and frequently touched their carefully coiffed wigs, as if holding on to a more tenuous femininity.

In sexuality textbooks, the two groups are completely distinct. In theory, transsexuals are generally certain from an early age that their sex and gender are at odds and want to permanently alter their bodies to fit the image they have of themselves, while transvestites are typically heterosexual men who get a sexual charge from occasionally dressing up as women. In the real world, however, this distinction often breaks down. Many transsexuals, for a variety of reasons, must content themselves with cross-dressing, sometimes along with hormonal and electrolysis treatments.

Occasionally there is some tension between the two groups. In private, transsexuals might refer to cross-dressers as "men in skirts" or even "chicks with dicks", but in general transgender activists realise that they are both such tiny minorities that they have to find common cause not only with one another but with other marginalized groups, especially gays and lesbians.



Martine [Rothblatt] was actually outed to her parents by her nine-year-old daughter who said to them one day, "How come Daddy only wears dresses when you're not around?"

Some of the most crucial issues for transsexuals were raised at the workshop on health law. It was chaired by Martine Rothblatt, a Washington, D.C., communications industry attorney who had been living fulltime as a female for the past two years and was scheduled for surgery shortly. As Martine, a tall, strong-featured woman who was raising four children, related her experiences, it was apparent that, compared to others, she had had a relatively smooth transition between genders.

When Martine came-out to friends, colleagues, and her parents, she encountered a very surprised but ultimately understanding response. Martine was actually outed to her parents by her nine-year-old daughter who said to them one day, "How come Daddy only wears dresses when you're not around?" Martine claimed to be "maxing out on happiness" since she had decided to live as a woman. But, in one of the many Catch-22's of transsexual life, because gender-dysphoria is officially labelled a psychiatric disorder and a medical pathology, a candidate for sex reassignment surgery who acts completely normal can be rejected for treatment.

The field is regulated by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, named after the New York endocrinologist who first popularised the term 'transsexual' and wrote widely about the phenomenon. The professional group of medical and psychological caretakers has only recently allowed a transgendered person on its board. The Harry Benjamin Association's widely followed standards of care decree that a candidate for hormone therapy and sexual reassignment surgery must have the written approval of a certified therapist after no less

than three months of care; he or she must live fulltime in the sought after gender for at least a year before being accepted for surgery; and a partner in a heterosexual marriage might not be eligible for the operation. (Transsexuals feel strongly that this reluctance to create gay or lesbian couples is homophobic, but it is also true that in 1971 a woman won a hefty judgement from a gender clinic for irrevocably and non-consensually cutting off, so to speak, her marital rights.)

For many transsexuals these protocols foster gender stereotyping (behaviour considered inappropriate for the candidate's desired gender will not pass muster); are class biased (many transsexuals cannot afford the psychological visits that must precede expensive and largely uninsurable surgery); and are just plain humiliating. "We are like a colonised people", said Susan Stryker, wearing a 'Transgender Nation' t-shirt. "We are forced to speak the oppressor's language and submit to his law."

By no means were all transgendered people as militant as Susan. For many, assimilation into their new gender was the fervently desired goal. They gladly attended the gender identity clinic's department classes to learn how to 'pass', if they were male-to-females, by walking on high-heels while appearing sober at the same time. Indeed, many radical feminists complain loudly and with some justification that transsexuals themselves reinforce gender stereotyping.

The more radical transsexuals felt that all of us have masculine and feminine sides to some degree, and that 'gender creative' people were simply those who were willing and able to express themselves completely - something that in our society "takes a lot of ovaries to do", according to Martine Rothblatt, who liked the symmetry that she had spent half her life as a male and would now spend the second half as a female. These people wanted to shift the grounds of the debate from the clinical language of the medical establishment to one of human rights - specifically, the right of transsexuals to control their own bodies and have access to hormone treatment and sex reassignment surgery on demand.

Male-to-female surgery is both less expensive and less problematic than female-to-male, which partially accounts for the fact that male-to-females greatly outnumber female-to-males. (An equally important reason for the gap, which is narrowing, may be the greater latitude society gives women in dress and lifestyle). The creation of a 'neo-vagina' averages \$12,000 to \$15,000, not counting the lifetime use of oestrogen. It involves dissecting the penis while preserving the urethra, then turning the extremely sensitive penile sheath inside out, reinserting it into the abdominal cavity, and constructing an entry framed with labia made from the scrotum. It is frequently orgasmic and ready for active use after six to eight weeks of healing.

In contrast, female-to-male transsexuals must choose between form and function, with neither choice providing a completely satisfactory result and the total cost for both a bilateral mastectomy and genitoplasty running anywhere from \$20,000 to \$40,000 and up. The most common model is a 'micro-penis', where the female clitoris, somewhat enlarged by male hormones, is released from the clitoral hood. Orgasm can generally be achieved but not penetration. Most aesthetically satisfying by much less sensitive is a penis-like flap taken from the arm or thigh and held permanently semi-erect by a bone implant, resulting in what female-to-males sometimes refer to as a 'pants-stuffer'.

All the transsexuals I talked to agreed that the surgical procedure, while perhaps the most dramatic aspect of gender transition, is far from the most important. (Indeed, some transsexuals are satisfied with the changes in their bodies and psyches that hormone therapy alone induces and skip the surgery entirely). If sex is inevitably a male/female polarity, they insisted, gender is a broad spectrum along which each of us stands at different points, even changing our position along this continuum of role possibilities in the course of our lives or, in some cases, in the course of any given day of our lives.

Perhaps no one embodied the fluidity of gender as literally as the workshop leader, Sharon-Ann. At the moment, she wore a demure puffy sleeved dress with a lace collar, but she was also an ex-Marine and a competitive athlete. Sharon Ann is the cross-dressing pseudonym of a man who describes himself as 'bi-gendered'. Married for more than twenty-nine years and the father of three daughters (he planned to give away the middle one in marriage the following weekend, very much the tuxedo-clad father of the bride), he spent 90 percent of his life as a male and "lets Sharon-Ann out" only at transgender events and in the office he rents to conduct his manifold gender-community activities.

Sharon Ann's fondest dream is to wake up each morning and decide whether to be masculine or feminine "based on my mood or the weather or the activities I have on my calendar". His wife and children accept his transgenderism, and his two-year-old grandchild even called him 'grandma/grandpa' on one occasion. But because he fears that coming-out of the closet would cause him to be fired from a job he loves, living such a gender blending life is not an option for him. Sharon-Ann's gender versatility began when he was a boy. His Junior League mother wanted a baby daughter and dressed him in little girl's outfits as a child, but when he began wearing her clothes on his own, she ridiculed him and called him a sissy. At the age of six or seven his father became the dominant presence in his life and encouraged his more masculine side, particularly a love of competitive sports, both as player and fan, that continues today.

In his boyhood and teenage years Sharon-Ann's mother, who had visions of him becoming "another Heifetz" allowed him to wear her clothing only when practicing the violin. ("I'd be sitting in my room in her slip, high heels and pearl choker practicing scales for hours on end, and she'd come into my room for something and actually pretend not to notice). The result was that he became an excellent violinist and a compulsive cross-dresser. In college and law school, where he dated women in public and cross-dressed in private, the 'mixed messages' about his own identity troubled him deeply. But after surviving boot camp and basic training on his way to becoming a Marine Corps lawyer, he "didn't feel I had to apologise to anyone for being less than a man."

"The basic dynamic in my life is balancing both aspects of myself," Sharon-Ann explains, "I think of it as talking two different languages, since language and gender, after all, are the two skills society trains us to perform practically from birth."

Susan Stryker has an even more radical vision of the social role of transsexuals in the larger world, which came out in the debate over the wording of a gender bill of rights that would be presented to the United Nations. She likened those of us who stay in the same gender all our lives to people who never leave their hometown, whereas she and other transsexuals are much more intrepid travellers. She sees her own gender transition, as "a magical journey to transform the constructed realities of nature and society."

Far-fetched as they may be, such transgender visions are more realistic than they would have been only a decade or two ago. Historically, gender identity is a constantly shifting terrain, and there seems little doubt that we are entering a transformative period. It's hard to know where these changes will end up or precisely what caused them. Gender is one of those crucial focal points that act upon - and are acted upon by - all aspects of a society, even contradictory ones.

In some cultures, such as pre-revolutionary France, where women in the court temporarily gained considerable power, a certain freedom of gender identity was encouraged simply because it did not have to be accompanied by a loss of status. (The Chevalier D'Eon, an eighteenth century French diplomat and spy who lived most of his life as a woman, became so celebrated that 'eonism' was an early term for transsexualism.) In other cultures, such as those Native American and Middle Eastern tribal societies where the masculine warrior ideal is taken to an extreme, transgenderism seems to serve as a socially sanctioned escape valve for people who don't want to compete.

By and large, any loosening of social constraints encourages a corresponding freedom of gender expression - think of the late Roman Empire or the Weimar Republic. The reason why gender blurring in the late twentieth century may be more pervasive and longer lasting is that it seems to be part of a worldwide paradigm shift of both the body and the body-politic. The old bipolar Cold War standoff has been replaced by a world where there are many centres of political, economic and military power. The new communications and information technologies pull signals out of an omni-dimensional cyberspace. A growing ecological consciousness envisions humankind as part of a Great Chain of Being that is circular rather than hierarchical, placing more emphasis on inter-dependence than on an evolutionary ascent from 'bottom' to 'top'. Still closer to home, the ideal of the old bipolar mom-and-pop family is being replaced by looser knit networks of kinship and affection.

So it should come as no surprise that even something most of us think of as immutably written in the genes have become more a matter of individual expression than ever before. In gender, fashion - not biology - may be our destiny.

In a world freer from binary oppositions, you could choose to live your life within fairly conventional gender limits, as most of us do, or you could, as Sharon-Ann dreamed of doing, change your gender identity daily. You could set out from one fixed gender polarity and travel to the other, as the majority of transsexuals do, or you could take off for gender parts unknown with Susan Stryker.

Such thoughts occasioned by the Houston conference brought to mind an experience in the early 1970s when I was invited to a party given for the writer Jan Morris. It was not long after she had undergone male-to-female sex reassignment surgery. Most of the other guests had been personally acquainted with James Morris, who had roamed the breadth and heights of the world reporting on far-flung wars and accompanying Sir Edmund Hillary on his conquest of Mount Everest. They seemed frightened and even repulsed by what he had become - a proper, dowdy, middle-aged Englishwoman who looked as though a trip to the local tearoom was about all the adventure she could handle.

She stood alone in her tweed skirt and sensible shoes amid a swirl of literary lights, and so I, untroubled by before and after comparisons, had a chance to talk to her at some length. It didn't surprise me to learn that, far from being a retreat into conventionality, she saw her gender switch as the greatest adventure of her life. But I was struck even then, and much more so upon distant reflection, that she spoke wistfully and somewhat prophetically about a time in the future when "the slow overlapping of the genders" as she put it, when she wrote up her experiences a few years later in *Conundrum*, would make the kind of bloody violation she had endured in a Moroccan clinic unnecessary.

In the day-to-day world most transsexuals, like the rest of us, have less cosmic thoughts on their minds and try to snatch small victories from the ever threatening jaws of defeat. Before I left Houston Laura Skaer told me about an incident that had happened to her late the night before. She had wandered into a nearly empty hotel bar looking for friends and had struck up a conversation with a travelling businessman. For a couple of hours they talked about their lives with the kind of freedom strangers who will never meet again often feel. Towards closing time the man told Laura she was the most empathetic woman he had ever met, and asked what she was doing in Houston.

"When I told him that I was a transsexual attending a gender law conference he was astonished", Laura said. "But after recovering somewhat he asked me politely if he could see me up to my room. At the door he asked if he could kiss me good night. The moment seemed right, and I nodded. Then I told him he had made me feel like complete woman for the first time in my life. "Laura, you don't need me to feel like a woman," he said, and left. "It was such a wonderful moment for me."

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