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A Farewell to Passing

... and a Note on Labels, Surgery, Definitions, Religions and Transcendence

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Gender transition can be fraught with lots of traps that aren't obvious at first. Two of these are being labelled and 'passing'. When I began my own gender transition

I was only vaguely aware of either issue. I was then thirty-six, and after years of denial I finally gave up my vain attempts at trying to be a man, and finally came-out to being a woman.

Four years later and I've undergone a lot of changes. I've gone from fronting as a man, being employed as a public-servant, nominally Christian, and living in Perth (Western Australia), to fronting as a woman, being a visual-arts student at university, a pagan, and now live in Newcastle (New South Wales). The biggest

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change however was probably coming to terms with being a woman and at the same time accepting the masculine side of myself.

This article details some of the observations and conclusions I've made along the way, and is based on a plenary I gave at the 1998 National Organisation of Women Students Australia (N.O.W.S.A.) Conference, which I attended in July 1997.

Labels

In a recent artwork of mine, I used some of the following list of labels that have been used to describe me:

- artist; bisexual; crone; daughter, eccentric; epileptic; friend; galla; geek-girl; human being; Laura Seabrook; male; middle-aged; outgoing; pagan; pre-operative; queer; shy; single; sub-genius; transgender, transsexual; trekker; university student; Western Australian; witch; woman and writer.

The artwork was entitled 'Labels are for Tin Cans'. In it, I made my own image into a range of generic products.

You'll notice that some of the labels I've mentioned are not normally thought of in that way, like my name or the fact that I'm a university student. Others seem only to be accurate at certain times in my life, like middle-aged, pre-operative, or once again, university student. But they're labels all the same. And no one label ever encompasses all the qualities that a person possesses - their function is to do the opposite - provide a shorthand way of dealing with other people.

Now even if you don't label yourself, other people probably will. Labels in themselves are nothing new or even bad. They are just an easy means by which we handle information about the world and each other. It's so much easier for most people to refer to others by using labels than it is to examine them too closely. That takes time and effort, and these always seem to be in short supply.

Passing

Allied to the idea of labels is that of 'passing'. This is the reaction to the effort you put into your appearance and behaviour. I first read about passing in a book called *Freaks*, as follows:

There is, that is to say, no agreement among those traditionally called 'Freaks' about what they would like, for programmatic reasons to be called now; only a resolve that it be something else. Those who still earn a living by exhibiting themselves in side shows apparently prefer to be called 'entertainers' and 'performers' like tightrope walkers and clowns. But larger numbers of 'strange people' do not want to be considered performers or indeed anything special or unique. They strive therefore to 'pass', i.e., to become assimilated into the world of 'normals' either by means of chemotherapy, like certain Dwarfs and Giants, or difficult and dangerous operations, like some Hermaphrodites or conjoined twins.

I read this in 1973 when I was sixteen and at the time I didn't think that passing would be something relevant to myself. But I was

already in a state of denial over being transsexual. This didn't end until 1994, when I began my gender transition. Up until that time, I'd felt myself to be a 'fake' male but not a man. When I finally began my transition I 'came-out' not just as a woman, but as me. Internally I have the gender identity of woman, and initially it was very important that I be recognised as such, so I considered passing to be vital.

Now some transgendered people think that three things validate you as a woman: Passing - that is, not being detected as being transgendered; Sex with men - if they find you attractive then you're doing something right; and having your own vagina - you must be a woman if you've got one, right?

But really none of these do. People will perceive others differently, depending upon any number of variables. Men will have sex with lots of things, not just women (Just check out the emergency wards sometimes). Plenty of female-to-male transsexuals still have their vaginas - they're not women, but transgendered men.

But passing is the most obvious of these because it's the most visible. And it's not just transgendered people who have problems with passing. The act of 'passing' can be quite real for many people. For example, Anne Bolin on page 138 of her book *In Search of Eve* recounts the following anecdote that happened during her research for the book:

Another incident was also revealing. A friend was visiting who had suffered a pituitary disease that resulted in the development of extremely large hands, feet, and head. She was a genetic female and had no gender conflict. In the midst of our discussion another friend dropped by. She came in and proceeded to the kitchen with me, and in a whispered voice, apologised for interrupting me because she thought I was interviewing a transsexual informant. This friend had met several transsexuals who, recognising a sympathetic other, had revealed their transsexualism to her. As a consequence, she questioned this woman's gender on the basis of her large hands and had ascribed her transsexual status.

And Naomi Wolfe writes on pages 239-240 in *Promiscuities*:

The shaming of girls and women from acknowledging a sexuality on their own terms, or a sexual past, pressures them into a contemporary version of 'passing'. The need to "pass" for someone other creates a vulnerability to external anxieties about womanhood in one's private life - as well as vulnerability about the fact of one's womanhood in the workplace.

Another good example of passing is a recent film called *Gattaca*. This is arguably a science fiction film set in the near future. In it, people are genetically engineered, registered, and their future performance predicted from birth. Personal identification is made by advanced D.N.A. testing, and in most cases everyone knows exactly who the other person is.

The result is a totally stratified society in which a marriage proposal is accompanied with an exchange of genetic data. The main character (Vincent) is a person who is classified as a 'lower class' of person. With collusion he manages to pass as a genetically 'better' person in order to work at a better job. While this might sound far fetched, it seems all too likely an extension of current practice.

So you see, it isn't just transgendered folks that are involved in the passing act, everybody does (or fails to) one way or another. And on the whole, people don't question this. People mistake the map for the territory, mistake one word for another, and that's where the trouble starts. Our appearance, clothing and bodies are part of passing and in doing so become symbols of who we are or aspire to be.

Surgery

The media for their own ends are constantly manipulating these symbols, as it is from there that we look for images of who and what is considered normal. The entire fashion and cosmetics industry is built upon people's dissatisfaction with their appearance. Thousands of women have breast enhancements and reductions and facial alterations in response to this. Is it any wonder that transsexuals have 'genital makeovers' (the term *Cosmopolitan* used recently) to convert our genitals from one set to another. We're just doing what other women do, but in a more obvious manner. But facial and body modification can go too far. The recent cases of Jocelyn Wildenstein and Caprice illustrate this. Jocelyn Wildenstein has had over twelve surgical procedures on her face at a cost of over \$50,000. But her face looks more like a doll than a human one. She was last reported suing her husband for pressuring her into undergoing such surgery in the first place. Caprice is another Australian male-to-female transsexual. She has had ten surgical procedures over seven years at a cost of \$80,000 to make her over in the image of Barbie; the details are extensive and horrific: implants in hips, buttocks, cheek, lips and breasts, four ribs removed; a nose job; her jaw has been chiselled; her eye sockets deepened and sex reassignment surgery.

And while I support Caprice's right to choose to do this, I question the wisdom of it. What happens in ten or twenty years time when she can no longer maintain the image so desired? Human beings age, Barbie doesn't.

I was fortunate to read Kaz Cooke's *Real Gorgeous* before starting transition. It helped temper my fashion sense to more comfortable, sensible clothing. When I wrote to Ms. Cooke to thank her for the book, she replied saying that I was the first respondent to say that she'd wanted wider hips! Another book I read just before transition was Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, published in 1978. This is a critique of the current medical and social theories of transsexuality.

Raymond does this from a separatist/feminist perspective. She rejects 'male-to-constructed-females' (her words) as women on the grounds that we have XY chromosomes and a different history from other women. To Raymond we are patriarchal controlled eunuchs whose function is to keep women in place, who 'sponge off the spirit of womanhood', And she considers 'female-to-constructed-males'

as being misguided women.

Definitions

All of which raises the question of exactly what is a woman? Raymond asserts "that it is someone born with XX chromosomes that has a history of being raised as a girl or woman". Common sense notions would seem to support this. But common sense notions are gained from the culture that one inhabits, and that culture is influenced by the media and other sources. So once again we come back to the idea of labels and how they are applied.

Alexander Murray, in a recent issue of *Venereology* suggests that there are three types of attitudes within societies and individuals as regards transgender issues:

- **Pre-Transsexual:** This is a model of gender as categorical, discrete, and dualistic. Within this model masculine and feminine are separate and unambiguous. In such an attitude, it is considered impossible to move from one category to another.
- **Pro-Transsexual:** This allows for regulated movement between gender poles. Gender crossers are generally expected to possess innate physical and behavioural characteristics similar to the target gender and make efforts to change characteristics that are dissimilar.
- **Post-Transsexual:** These express a model of gender as dimensional and fluid and allow individuals relative freedom to find their own place along the spectrum of gender and to experiment with different places at different times.

From this perspective, Raymond upholds a pre-transsexual schema, against a pro-transsexual one. Anyone who's interested in a counter argument would do well to read Sandy Stone's *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-transsexual manifesto*, which, as you might gather from the title, proposes a post-transsexual schema.

I will mention one thing about her definition however. Before attending the N.O.W.S.A. conference I made a trip to visit a friend at Nimbin. On the way I gave a lift to her boyfriend. To my surprise he told me that he had a sister who used to be a brother. My first reaction was "aha - they're transsexual", but I was mistaken. His sibling was born with XX chromosomes but due to a medical problem, female hormones were not produced until late-teens.

This person appeared to be male and was raised as a boy, and was endlessly teased about having small genitalia. Then, about at about eighteen years of age, their testes retreated into the body to become ovaries, the penis changed to a clitoris and they grew breasts. This would have been a tragedy except for the fact that secretly they'd always thought of themselves as a woman or a girl, so in the end they were proven right. Now the only difference between that person and myself is that I was born with XY chromosomes.

When you think about it, you might realise that the words 'woman' and 'man' are both just labels. They don't actually describe females and males as such, but the gender roles expected of them. These can be complex or simple, and vary from one culture to another. It's easier to assume such roles than be original.

From the moment we are born we exist in a sea of culture, one that inundates us with ideas about what and who we are based on sex, skin colour, birth place of origin, sexuality as many divisions and distinctions that you need or want. Carol Travis says on page sixty of her book *The Mismeasure of Woman*:

My concern is with a growing tendency to turn the tables from 'us - them' thinking (with men as the problem) to 'them - us' thinking (with men as the problem). Framing the question in terms of polarities; regardless of which pole is the valued one, immediately sets up false choices for women and men. It continues to divide the world into 'men' and 'women' as if these categories were unified opposites. It obscures the fact that the opposing qualities associated with masculinity and femininity are caricatures to begin with.

But here's the catch. If I can see labels and passing for what they are - social constructions and the implementation of such - then how can I claim the label of woman, as I do? There are two answers to this. The first is found on page 243 of Naomi Wolfe's *Promiscuities*, which deals with rites of passage:

When over the course of those years did we 'become women'? Was it when we first put on make-up? With our first kiss? When we discovered our sexual identity? When we first had intercourse? When we had earned our own money for the first time? When we graduated from high school? When we first became pregnant, those of us who did? No. None of those events turned us into women. I think we became women, in our culture, when we made a decision that, even if we didn't know what womanhood meant or whether we had arrived there for sure, all the markers imposed on us were flawed, and that we were somehow going to find a way, through whatever struggle it might take, to determine the meaning of 'becoming a woman' for ourselves.

And all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, did indeed find our various ways through not all the way to where we wanted to be; but closer.

I read that, and realised that it was exactly what I, and others like me do. There are no 'women-born-women' or 'men-born-men' either. We are all born babies, and it is our own sense of self-identity and what we do about it that makes us who we are. On that trip to Nimbin I mentioned my other travelling companion told me that in the development of the human fertilised egg, the first item to be developed is the blastopore, which later develops into the anus. In other words we are all born assholes, and it's up to us what we do about it.

Religions

The second way I know about being a woman is through my religions. I have two - Pagan and Sub-Genius. I'll mention Pagan first.

In my version of paganism, loosely based on Wicca, there is the Goddess and the God. The Goddess is the supreme feminine force in the universe, and the God her junior counterpart. Junior, because the Goddess comes first and epitomises all the aspects of femininity associated with being a woman. The God on the other hand is a shape shifter, a changeling - and a gatekeeper of change who delimits boundaries, who is prepared to die and be reborn again in change and growth. This is a far cry from Jehovah, though Jesus fits this pattern well. What distinguishes my brand of paganism from others is that I'm Neo-Hellenic. I have a pantheon of Greek! Roman Goddess, each with aspects of the Goddess that are relevant to me. Three of these are Hecate, Cybele and Athena. Athena is a transgendered Goddess - she was born from the head of Zeus after he swallowed the Titan Metis. She's butch, but a woman all the same, and I consider her a spiritual sister. Hecate is queen of the underworld and witches and I consider her my spiritual grandmother. Cybele is a nature Goddess, who gives boons and retribution with even serves. And Cybele had a son Attis, who became her adopted daughter. In ancient times both Hecate and Cybele had transgendered priestesses in their services. They were castrated males who lived as women thereafter. Cybele's were known as the Gallae, and I am a Galla in her service. Our symbol is the labrys, which in ancient times were used in religious dances to draw blood.

And what is a sub-genius? It's a follower of an authentically bogus religion at the head of which is a mythical character of J.R. 'Bob' Dobbs. The whole thing is both a joke and deadly serious. To be Sub-Genius is to be outrageous, heretical, religious, laid back, cynical and sincere all in one. "Bob" promises eternal salvation or triple your money back! It's a way of using humour in dealing with the world. It doesn't matter if you can't get the joke, it's there all the same. Anyway, there are four sub-genii gender sets: Male-Male (Overman); Female-Female (Overwoman); Male-Female (FeMale 2) and Female-Male (Male 3).

My pagan name is 'Polychrome, daughter of two rainbows', a Galla of the Goddess; and my Sub-Genius church name is 'Octobriana Oberwoman', a FeMale to Yetinsyn, Now the whole point of having these religions is that they fill up a spiritual vacuum within me. Paganism does this in a sincere fashion. Sub-Genius does it as a joke, and is valuable in my retaining my sense of humour. Either way, they provide me with alternative labels for myself. In Paganism I'm a maiden or crone (never a mother I'm afraid, except to my pet dog Pegasus), in Sub-Genius I'm a Yetinsyn. And the sources for those labels are not dependent upon other people's opinions, but my own.

Transcendence

The thing about dealing with such labels is not that they exist, but in how they are considered. Labels have power over people when it is assumed that they are natural and uncontested states of being. But the truth is that labels, including that of women and men, are social constructs. By realising this, and being conscious that each is only a marker, I believe that it's possible to raise above the definitions proscribed by them. In such a way it's still possible to embrace them, but in a healthy fashion.

What often happens with girls like myself is that we have reassignment surgery on the quiet, and then discretely return as if nothing has happened and that we were like this all along. In the process of gender transition, in which reassignment surgery is seen as the conclusion, our real histories disappear. This happens because we seek to pass as female women, Instead of ourselves - male women. I'm not going to do this.

In my visual arts studies I've considered pursuing performance art as a career option. In my research I came across Orlan. Now Orlan creates performance art by having plastic surgery on her face and body and presenting that in video format. She reads prose and poetry, philosophy, and indulges in theatrics other than the surgical ones in this process. She has made statements such as "I am a man and a woman" and "I am a female-female transsexual".

I realised I could do the same on at least one occasion. Earlier this year a birth was broadcast on the Internet (and later the reassignment surgery). I think I can do better than just documenting the affair. I have envisioned making my own reassignment surgery a performance piece, broadcast on the Internet with readings from Bornstein, Money, Stone, Raymond, Tavis and Wolfe. And there is a point to this.

By doing so, I get what I desire in several ways. I get a set of genitals that will finally match my internal body image. But I also avoid the trap of erasing myself in the process. And I have an opportunity to highlight and explore the nature of the self and the body in the manner that Orlan does.

I have no idea if I'll realise this ambition. Annie Fox in the same edition of *Venereology* as Murray makes an observation that there are two types of transsexuals - those who choose a private path and those that make a public statement. As an artist who cannot divorce her own issues and self from her creative work, I cannot possibly see how I can be anything but the later.

It'll be fun finding out.

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