

Survival. Activism. Feminism?: Exploring the Lives of Trans* Individuals in Chicago

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Abstract

Radical lesbian feminist Sheila Jeffreys (1997, 2003, 2014) argues that trans individuals are destroying feminism by succumbing to the greater forces of the patriarchy and by opting for surgery and thus conforming to normative ideas of sex and gender. Jeffreys is not alone in her views. Janice Raymond (1994, 2015) also maintains that trans individuals work either as male-to-females (MTFs) to uphold stereotypes of femininity and womanhood, or as female-to-males (FTMs) to join the ranks of the oppressors, support the patriarchy, and embrace hegemonic masculinity. Both Jeffreys and Raymond conclude that sex/gender is fixed by genitals at birth and thus deny trans individuals their right to move beyond the identities which they were assigned at birth. Ironically, a paradox is created by these feminist theorists, who deny trans individuals the right to define their own lives and control their own bodies. Such essentialist discourse, however, fails to recognize the oppression, persecution, and violence to which trans individuals are subjected because they do not conform to the sex that they were assigned at birth. Jeffreys (1997) also claims there is an emergency and that the human rights of those who are now identifying as trans are being violated. Their critiques are not only troubling to me, as a self-identified lesbian feminist, but are also illogical and transphobic. My research, with trans identified individuals in Chicago, presents a different story and will begin to show another side of the complex relationship between trans and lesbian feminist communities. When considering the lives of my research participants, another agenda, counter to that of what is assumed by Jeffreys and Raymond, emerges and shows how trans individuals are moving forward to embrace themselves and their communities, while also establishing, or in some cases maintaining, a relationship with feminist values and politics.

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SURVIVAL. ACTIVISM. FEMINISM?

Survival. Activism. Feminism?: Exploring the Lives of Trans* Individuals in Chicago

Some radical lesbian feminists, like Sheila Jeffreys (1997, 2003, 2014) argue that trans individuals are destroying feminism by succumbing to the greater forces of the patriarchy and by opting for surgery, thus conforming to normative ideas of sex and gender. Jeffreys is not alone in her views. Janice Raymond (1994, 2015) also maintains that trans individuals work either as male-to-females (MTFs) to uphold stereotypes of femininity and womanhood, or as female-to-males (FTMs) to join the ranks of the oppressors, support the patriarchy, and embrace hegemonic masculinity. Both Jeffreys and Raymond conclude that sex/gender is fixed by genitals at birth and thus deny trans individuals their right to move beyond the identities that they were assigned at birth. Ironically, a paradox is created by these radical lesbians feminist theorists, who deny trans individuals the right to define their own lives and control their own bodies. Such essentialist discourse, however, fails to recognize the oppression, persecution, and violence to which trans individuals are subjected because they do not conform to the sex that they were assigned at birth.

Jeffreys (1997) also claims there is an emergency and that the human rights of those who are now identifying as trans are being violated. These critiques are not only troubling to me, as a self-identified lesbian feminist, but are also illogical and transphobic. My research, with trans identified individuals in Chicago, presents a different story and will show another side of the complex relationship between trans and lesbian feminist communities. When considering the lives of my research participants, another agenda, counter to that of what is assumed by Jeffreys and Raymond, emerges and shows how trans individuals are moving forward to embrace themselves and their communities, while also establishing, or in some cases maintaining, a relationship with feminist values and politics.

In this article, I will discuss and further complicate the complex relationship between trans and lesbian feminist communities. I will begin with a discussion of the history of radical lesbian feminist discourse, specifically looking at how Jeffreys and Raymond have made a

space for themselves within academic discourse, despite their work that is often transphobic and mistaken. Next, I will consider the direct critiques of the discourse of the radical lesbian feminist community and how these critiques have provided structure on which trans activism continues to be built. In the final section of this article, I will discuss my own research which is focused on trans* identified individuals in Chicago. Through the themes of survival, activism and feminism, I will explore the ways that trans identified individuals are continuing to break away from institutional and medicalized discourses about sex and gender and represent their communities not only as activists, but also as feminists.

Literature Review

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been an increase in scholarship relative to trans issues by both trans and non-trans identified individuals. While many of these works are biographical, a good deal of ethnographical research is also emerging. Ethnography, a qualitative research method used not only to describe, but also to interpret certain cultural practices and beliefs, has historically been used to by anthropologists in non-Western contexts, and, since the 1960s and 1970s, has been used by sociologists in their research of Western societies.

During the 1960s, John Gagnon and William Simon conducted ethnographic studies that explored how North American homosexuals functioned in their everyday lives and communities. This method of sociological research was revolutionary as it was some of the first work that avoided pathologizing homosexuality and shifted away from questions of causation (Gagnon and Simon, 1967). In 1972, Esther Newton followed, publishing one of the first book-length ethnographies of LGBTQ life, *Mother Camp*. This work, a survey of female impersonators in Chicago and Kansas City in 1968, moved away from the pathological discourses and instead paid greater attention to the cultural perspective (Newton, 1972). During the 1990s, LGBTQ studies became more accepted in academia and several ethnographic studies of United States communities, including Weston's *Families We Choose* (1991), Newton's *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (1993), and Kennedy and

Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993), were published. It wasn't until the late 1990s that trans communities increasingly became a topic of interest.

Within the last twenty years, ethnographic research focusing on trans communities in North America and beyond has emerged (Blackwood and Wieringa, 1999; Devor, 1997) Valentine, 2007). These works, and others, have paved the way for larger scale survey and interview projects, such as Beemyn and Rankin's *The Lives of Transgender People* (2011), as well as transcentric anthology projects including two volumes of *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker and Whittle, 2006; Stryker and Aizura, 2013). More recently, we're also beginning to see increasing research in others areas including employment and work (Schilt, 2006), the legal system and prison industrial complex (Currah, Juang, and Minter, 2006; Spade, 2015; Stanley and Smith, 2011) and other public spaces and institutions such as schools (Beemyn and Rankin, 2011), and gendered restrooms (Herman, 2013).

Although this field of inquiry is constantly growing, it is important to continue adding to this limited field to include information relating to specific communities and the constant changes within these communities. There is a present tradition of ethnographic research spanning communities across North America including San Francisco, New York City, Buffalo, New York, Kansas City and Chicago. Even though a small amount of research has previously been done in Chicago, it is important to continue the ethnographic tradition to include the multiple aspects of community and the ever growing and changing groups of individuals. As a lesbian feminist, I am extremely invested in this research because of the personal experiences I have had within both trans and lesbian feminist communities and hope to continue to contribute to this ever growing and changing field of research.

Only recently have individuals began to publish work specific to transgender communities and feminism. In 2007, Sally Hines published *TransForming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care*, based on her 2000-2005 doctoral and postdoctoral research. This UK based qualitative study analyzes the relationship between feminism, trans masculinity, and trans femininity. Her research, based on interviews, telephone conversations, as well as email and other written correspondence, explores how

individuals articulate their experiences of second wave feminism and how they relate to contemporary feminism, both pre and post transition. Hines found that the majority of trans men she worked with were involved in feminist and lesbian communities, viewed second wave feminism as socially and politically problematic, and found contemporary feminism to be less hostile. Trans feminine individuals felt rejected by radical feminist communities who refused to accept their female identity. These same feelings were common amongst trans feminine individuals who attempted to coexist and participate in activism within earlier radical feminist communities.

While most of the early trans research focused primarily on east and west coast communities, there is an increasing amount of research coming out of the Midwest. In 2003, John R. Butler published "Transgender DeKalb: Observations of an Advocacy Campaign," in the *Journal of Homosexuality*. Butler's auto-ethnography considers the September 2000 activist work of Community Members Against Discrimination (CMAD), a grassroots LGBT organization in DeKalb, Illinois. This group convinced their city council to add protection against discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression. Butler's work brings readers closer to the experiences of transgender members of the community while, at the same time, addresses his personal responsibilities as a scholar, community activist and member of the queer community.

Other recent trans-specific works from the Midwest mainly consider the controversy surrounding the 'womyn-born-womyn' policies of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) (Browne, 2010) and the alternative Pride festival activism and organizing of Dyke March Chicago (Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani, 2009; Ghaziani and Fine, 2008). Camp Trans, the counter-protest turned educational event and music festival, began in 1994 when trans activists protested and camped outside of the MWMF grounds and continued through 2012 (Hayes, 2010). Chicago Dyke March, which began in Chicago in 1996, continues, on yearly basis as active critique of the increasingly corporatization of Chicago Pride, and includes both trans identified men and women organizers and activists (Brown-Saracino and Ghaziani, 2009). As trans visibility in the Midwest increases, it is only appropriate that

inclusive scholarship continues to expand to include other, often under-represented communities. My research adds depth to the spectrum of previously published works and continues to give a voice to a Midwestern context, which is often underrepresented in scholarship.

The Radical Lesbian Feminist Discourse

In the early 1970s, radical lesbian feminists who were fed up with the misogynistic mind-set of gay liberation and anti-lesbian practices of women's liberation decided to create women-only spaces that would not only limit their contact with men, but would also privilege their lesbian identity. Because they felt the differences between men and women were products of nature, rather than that of society, it was crucial to exclude all men from their lives. Trans identified individuals, specifically MTFs, were also excluded from women-only spaces as they were viewed as biologically male and thus would always possess aggressive, masculine energies (Poirot, 2009). In 1973, Vice President of the San Francisco chapter of Daughters of Bilitis, Beth Elliot, was forced to resign after being outed as trans (Gallo, 2006). Later, in 1977, Sandy Stone, a recording engineer at Olivia Records, a women's music cooperative, was asked to resign when rumours that she was transsexual overwhelmed management (Stone 2006). Unfortunately, some separatist practices remain in place more recently at feminist events including the now defunct Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and also in public spaces and institutions such as prisons, public toilets, homeless shelters, and healthcare facilities.

Radical lesbians feminists have not only been working to physically exclude themselves from men, trans, and gender-non-conforming individuals, but also have been active in creating an academic discourse to accompany this movement. First in her 1994 work, *The Transsexual Empire* and continuing today in her more recent article, "Radical Feminist Activism in the 21st Century" (2015), Janice Raymond, a medical ethicist and women's studies professor, discusses trans issues as social, political, and institutional problems, that encourage a certain style and way of expressing gender in an individualized

fashion. In her introduction, Raymond (1994) concentrates on the multifaceted problems of trans identity, the belief that transsexualism is the ultimate way in which men possess women. If this were not enough, Raymond brings in another, even more sensitive and contested issue of feminist communities and beyond: rape.

“Rape, of course, is a masculinist violation of bodily integrity. All transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves...Because transsexuals have lost their physical “members” does not mean that they have lost their ability to penetrate women—women’s mind, women’s spaces and women’s sexuality” (p. 103-104).

Raymond uses this graphic description to emphasize her belief that trans individuals, who identify as feminists, enter into women’s spaces, through deception, which she qualifies as rape.

Sheila Jeffreys (1997, 2014), a political scholar, who has published extensively about history, women’s rights, and sexuality, employs a tone similar to that of Raymond, what she deems a “human rights approach” (1997, p. 55). She argues that “transsexualism/transgenderism” is a human rights violation. “I suggest that transsexual surgery and hormone treatment should be seen as state sanctioned violence...I suggest that transsexualism should best be seen in this light, as directly political, medical abuse of human rights” (1997, 59). In her more recent work, Jeffreys (2014) continues to address her concerns regarding the future of radical lesbian feminism based on the increase in individuals who identify as trans, with a new focus on those who identify within a spectrum of gender non-conforming identities, who are not currently focused on any types of gender affirming care and procedures, and the overall lack of critical scholarship on transgender, but those who she deems most affected, women and feminists. She is also critical of queer theory, including and how it has, “removed ‘gender’ from its basis in the subordination of women and made it into an aspect of consumerism, something to be assumed and played with, and inscribed on the body, something that can be bought and paid for through hormones and surgery” (Jeffreys 2014, p. 45).

Feminist commentators, most notably Carol Riddell and Sandy Stone, have critiqued radical lesbian feminists who are critical of transpeople and share the opinion that FTM individuals are crossing over to join the patriarchy and that MTF individuals are simply trying to infiltrate and destroy feminist communities with their androcentric influences and desires. In her 1980 critique of Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, Carol Riddell (2006), who self-identifies as a transsexual feminist, takes on Raymond's claim that transsexuals are dividing feminist communities. Riddell instead argues that it is radical lesbian feminists, like Raymond, that are ultimately creating a further divide in the feminist community by questioning transgender inclusion. As Riddell sees it, Raymond, by critiquing transpeople and their lives, is taking attention away from the greater issues of the feminist community. Also, by limiting her discussion of trans experiences to the stereotypical gender roles which transpeople play, Riddell finds Raymond's argument to have gone full circle, ending where it began with the issues of the patriarchy as systems of sex roles that have always been defined by men in positions of power.

In her 1987 article, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Sandy Stone (2006), also critiques the work of Raymond and tells a different "truth" about gender, one told through the lives and experiences of male-to-female transsexuals, herself included. Rather than classifying transsexuals as a "third gender," Stone instead describes transpeople as, "a genre—a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (p. 231). Instead of immediately dismissing transwomen as 'men,' Stone encourages those who may otherwise be critical to get to know transsexuals and to also work to develop a greater understanding of the relationship between gender identities and bodies. While she understands that some transpeople feel the need for and ultimately strive to pass, she also encourages them to resist passing in order to embrace, rather than erase, their histories and identities.

The History of Trans Activism

During the late seventies, trans activism established a greater presence in the United States. Bolin (1994) argues that it was through three key cultural shifts that we also began to observe a greater presence of trans communities. Initially, the closing of university based gender clinics allowed for greater public recognition, stressed the presence of legitimate alternatives, encouraged multiple treatment options, and increased the understanding of the difference between gender and sex. These changes also lessened the privileges and control of individual bodies by medical professionals. As the focus on the pathological model dwindled, grassroots political organizing flourished and multiple organizations and communities emerged. The greater influence of feminism also increased alternatives to traditional femininity. Through these multiple shifts, activism in trans communities materialized and intensified (Bolin, 1994, p. 465).

Roz Kaveney also summarizes what she believes to be the basis for trans politics and activism. She argues that by displaying solidarity with other trans identified individuals, building alliances with other areas of politics and thus moving away from single issue politics, intellectually and morally answering all intellectual and moral attacks on the trans community, refusing the pathological/medical model, and rejecting all politics which work against the trans community, transpeople were able to become increasingly prominent figures in political and activist communities (Kaveney 1999, 146). By embracing a multiple issue approach and realizing the immeasurable struggles of many individuals and groups, trans activists are coming together with others and fighting for greater equality and acceptance in society. Through these constant battles, trans individuals embrace their own powerful voices and continue to scrutinize those who are critical of their strengths.

Transpeople have always been important players in queer and feminist communities. Historical accounts of trans activism are often based in two historical events: the riots at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco (1966) and the Stonewall Inn in New York City (1969). While both of these incidents have similarities, the differences lie in the ways in which discourse has been created surrounding these events. Normative gay and lesbian

histories often point to Stonewall, and, in lesser instances the riots at Compton's, as the birthplace of gay liberation and future fights against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Trans histories suggest that gay and lesbian accounts of these incidents often succeed in downplaying the role of transpeople and trans/gender non-conforming oppression played in these cases (Stryker, 2008, p. 152). Despite their roles in these historically significant events, trans identified individuals, especially people of color, such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, are written out of the discourse.

In the 1990s, transgender activism continued to rise to the forefront, alongside other identity based activist groups. In 1992, Transgender Nation, an off-shoot of the San Francisco chapter of Queer nation began again the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) inclusion of "gender identity disorder" in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p. 5). During this same time, Jamison Green founded FTM International, which, from its beginnings as an FTM support group, grew to become an international personal and professional network for those who are exploring masculinity and transitioning (Stryker and Whittle, 2006, p. 5). Throughout the nineties and into the year 2000, transgender scholarship and scholars began to emerge, thus developing the field that remains strong today. Trans activists continue to push forward on many issues and were most recently successful in lobbying for the replacement of "gender identity disorder" from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). The term "gender dysphoria" will instead be used, thus will no longer label transpeople as "disordered" (APA, 2013).

Within the last ten years, large-scale trans activism has become increasingly visible within the Midwest. FORGE, a national education, advocacy and support umbrella organization supporting FTM+s(1) (female-to-male transsexuals and transgenderists, and others who were assigned female at birth but who have some level of masculine identification) and SOFFAs (Significant Others, Family, Friends and Allies), based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, began organizing around trans masculine issues in 1994, and, in 2007, presented the first national conference based in the Midwest for FTMs and SOFFAs.

With ninety workshops, seven keynote speakers, and multiple performance artists and musicians, this conference brought trans issues and activism in the Midwest to a new level (FORGE).

Groups throughout the Midwest, including Twin Cities [Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota] Trans March/Dyke March and Chicago Dyke March Collective, are mobilizing against transphobia in the queer community and the commercialization of Pride festivities, which often takes away from the activism and education upon which Pride Marches were initially founded. Through grassroots mobilization, these groups bring individuals together, regardless of gender identity, and create safe spaces where activism thrives. The Midwest is also seeing an increasing number of trans identified student groups, performance artists, and musicians who are working to educate the public and empower trans individuals.

Previous to this surge in activism, much of trans activism in the Midwest was focused on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) and their 'womyn-born-womyn' policy, which excluded trans women from the MWMF grounds. In 1991, Nancy Burkholder came out as trans to a group of other festival attendees and was later escorted out of the festival in the middle of the night. For the first time, the festival began to enforce a policy of allowing only "womyn-born-womyn" to attend (Williams, 2014).

This event sparked an outrage in the trans community and in the years to follow trans activists and allies conducted trans inclusion workshops and staged protests against the festival's transphobic policies. In the years to follow, this event, that became known as Camp Trans, was staged annually with the intent of "protesting the exclusion of trans women from women-only spaces, building a trans-inclusive community that is welcoming and safe for all, empowering the next generation of activists to fight for trans issues, and advocating for the inclusion of trans issues in progressive, queer and feminist movements" (Hayes, 2010, p. 160). Camp Trans continued to be a place for trans individuals and allies to build community and provide support and resources to those who individuals that do attend the festival until 2012. Much of my understanding of feminism is based in the context of activism. Feminists believe, and participate, in a movement that works to empower and

support the needs of women. Considering the extent of trans feminist activism in the Midwest as well as the scope of my research, it is important to bear in mind that an individual does not need to be biologically female in order to be a feminist.

Trans Identified Individuals in Chicago

By moving beyond the academic discourse and medicalization of trans identity and instead focusing on the personal and social aspects of trans identities, of only which a small portion is medical, it is possible to see how trans identified individuals refuse the pathological medical model by breaking out of the 'transsexual empire' and creating a space for themselves outside of other, more institutionalized discourses. As a self-identified lesbian feminist, I approach trans issues from an outsider perspective but do so with an understanding of feminist and activist research traditions and a desire to ground the research in the experiences of those with whom I am conversing. Having lived in Chicago, a community where I first encountered and formed relationships with trans identified individuals; I find it important to give these individuals a greater voice.

I use a qualitative approach in this research to gain insights about the social processes informing the lives and experiences of trans identified individuals. Qualitative methods in studies of gender and sexualities, increase visibility, challenge cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality and allow for individuals to self-identify within the research process (Gamson, 2000). The method that I use predominantly is interviews. In the beginning of this project, I also conducted a short questionnaire in order to gather basic information about potential participants and to start to better understand their experiences within Chicago communities. With the greater purpose of involving as diverse of a population of trans identified individuals as possible, I initiated a call for participants throughout the Chicagoland area. Information sheets and posters were distributed in person and via email to local colleges and universities, listservs, social groups, websites, health centers, drop-in centers, churches, community centers, various social spaces, and queer-friendly/frequented businesses. The questionnaires asked participants how they identify in

terms of sex, gender, sexual orientation, and race, who makes up their support system, what activities they participate in, if and how they feel their life has ever been limited because of their gender identity, how they define feminism, and finally, if they identify as a feminist. Initially, fifteen self-identified trans individuals showed interest in my project. Of those fifteen individuals, ten went on to complete the initial questionnaire and eventually five participated in individual interviews, which were completed during the spring and summer of 2005. Through these interviews and various follow-up emails, I collected the data that will be included in this section. Data was then coded using the themes of survival, activism, and feminism, which were determined as likely areas of focus, based on the existing literature. Interview questions also focused specifically on these three areas of interest.

Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews participants were allowed to tell their own stories and construct narratives of their lives and experiences. Interviews also allowed me to get beyond the basic questions of how many and when and to garner a more complex understanding of how individuals were living, working, and, often times, thriving through various communities in Chicago. The concepts of survival, activism, and feminism are of great importance to the lives of trans identified individuals. Rather than taking these ideas and applying them to the lives of individuals who have been privileged enough to share their personal stories, through various mediums including autobiography, film, journals, television, or other print and broadcast media, I instead felt it was necessary interact with individuals in a community with which I was already familiar.

The participants, ranging in age from eighteen to sixty, work in various professions, live in both the city and the suburbs, and have two common identifiers; they are not only trans, but, with one exception, are all white. Whiteness, as a commonality in trans identified individuals, is an interesting subcategory, but is not something I will consider at any great length, due to time and space constraints. Class, another factor that I will not be able to address, along with race, is an avenue that undoubtedly needs to be explored in further research. When referring to individual participants, I will use the words he and she and male and female, depending on the gender with which each person identifies. In the case of

Lynn, who identifies as bi-gendered, I will use the gender-neutral pronouns, originated by Leslie Feinberg (1998) of sie and hir, as these are the pronouns with which Lynn identifies.

With the responsibility of the safety and well-being of those I was interviewing in mind, all participants were provided with resource sheets that included a list of community resources, as well as my personal contact information and the information for the ethics board at the university at the time of the interview. Participants also consented to have their interview recorded and transcribed, both verbally and in writing. In order to further protect the identities of my participants, pseudonyms have been used not only for the individuals, but also for the organizations and institutions that they've mentioned throughout the course of their interviews. In order to ensure that participants felt safe during the interview process, interviews were arranged to take place in a location that was chosen by the participant, which included private homes or university queer student centers, or if the individual had no preference or asked that I provide the location, in a private conference room.

The individuals with whom I conducted personal interviews come from various age groups, educational backgrounds, and professions. Corey, resides on Chicago's north side, is thirty years old, university educated, works in publishing, and has lived in Chicago for four years. Jennifer, who has lived in Chicago for almost two years, is a twenty-three year old university student and is in the process of completing her Master's degree in Music. James is thirty-eight, has lived in the Chicagoland area for almost twenty years, and works in a university queer concerns office. Lynn, eighteen, grew up in Chicago's western suburbs, and is currently attending a Chicago area university with majors in English and Psychology. Finally, there is Brandon, twenty-one, who has lived his entire life in a suburb west of Chicago. He recently finished a degree in criminal justice and is seeking employment.

During the individual interviews, participants were asked to talk about their support systems, everyday lives and difficulties, activist work, and ideas about feminism. Each individual provided me with a series of articulate and well thought out answers. Identifying as trans is not a simple process for any of my participants, but is instead is a complex progression through life that takes great energy and sometimes complicates everyday life.

Survival

Survival, which includes everything from the very basics of food, clothing, and shelter, to difficult situations surrounding discrimination, employment, public harassment, violence, is an issue which seems to be never-ending and which many trans identified individuals must deal with on an everyday basis. While considering issues of survival with my interview participants, similar topics, including visibility, passing, professional life, financial issues, personal support systems, family life, and medical care, were raised, thus providing me with a foundation for this section. By taking into account various aspects of survival, we begin to see some of the most basic reasons why trans individuals refuse to simply disappear. Transpeople have instead,

“...taken their lives in their hands, they have crawled out of their closets and they have made transpeople into the big news that they are today. They have taken to shoving themselves down the throats of the rest of society, not just as whores on the sidewalks of Times Square...but also as biker boys, shop assistants, radical faeries, teachers, dykes, auto mechanics, stage magicians, singers, office clerks, politicians—the list is endless” (Whittle, 1999, p. 8).

When trans individuals become active and visible members of society, they often put great amounts of time and energy into passing. As Stone notes, “The most critical thing a transsexual can do, the thing that constitutes success, is to ‘pass.’ Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a ‘natural’ member of that gender” (2006, p. 231). If a trans individual does not pass, their ability to survive can be jeopardized.

Passing, living successfully and being accepted as a member of that gender, is a major aspect of trans survival. Whether it is at work, school, or social events, passing is an important issue in the lives of my research participants. While discussing the topic of survival with Brandon, passing was a focal point. In his experience, passing is essential, but is not a great struggle. In the summer of 2004, Brandon was working a summer job and was never questioned about his gender.

“I just showed up for work and everyone assumed I was male. It’s funny. I didn’t style my hair in a masculine way; it was about this length. I didn’t bind or anything. I just showed up and everyone assumed. Plus, I don’t have a very high-pitched voice that helps. I shave my peach fuzz. I do little things that most people don’t notice” (Brandon, personal communication).

While Brandon has experienced little difficulty in passing, that is not the case for all transpeople.

Jennifer struggles daily to maintain her appearance and is frustrated because she is unable to afford, what she calls “procedures to make my life better, like a woman’s” including facial electrolysis, body waxing, electrolysis, or at the very least, a new razor once a week, facial surgery, sex reassignment surgery (SRS), and to build, what she calls, “a common woman’s wardrobe.” At 6’ 3”, Jennifer knows she is never going to fit in with a crowd and has only recently gained complete confidence in using gender specific toilets. She is not asking for a perfect life, but rather a life that is more like that of a ‘normal’ woman. “I’m not asking to have a wonderful woman’s life. I’m just asking that I get somewhere near the average of what women have to deal with in life. Nothing more. Nothing less would be nice, but achieving the extra is up to me” (Jennifer, personal communication). Adhering to prescribed gender roles is a problematic idea for feminists, but the consequences of not passing are greater:

“If we don’t pass, we are for all time to be punished for our failure to become real. Either way we are meant to hang our heads in shame. Shame at our own incurable madness, at having the blatant, unnatural greed to actually become the desired self...whether passing or not passing, the true mark of our trans status is the shame we have to carry with us because we are trans” (Whittle, 1999, p. 7-8).

The survival of trans individuals is further complicated by the shame that both those who pass and those who do not pass must cope with. Through transitioning, some trans identified individuals can begin to cope with shame and become more comfortable with their bodies.

Transitioning is not the only option and is not something which all transpeople desire, but some transpeople do find transitioning to be valuable when considering survival.

For Corey, experiences with passing have been significantly different. Because there were no roles for butch women in theatre, Corey began to don facial hair and take on a male identity through drag performance. At this time, he began to realize that he “had been taking on male identity on stage...[and] everything just kind of clicked into place” (Corey, personal communication). He also felt he needed to keep that side of his life secretive. It wasn’t until he was invited to join a touring drag king company, and was presented as Corey, with male pronouns, that he became comfortable passing and was prepared to proceed with the transition. Since then performance has been a major part of Corey’s transition. Through his performances, Corey experienced life as visibly trans. This visibility not only aided him in transition, but also helped him gain greater acceptance within the Chicago community post transition.

While passing and visibility is vital to survival for many trans identified individuals, invisibility can also be difficult. Jamison Green shares the difficulties he has faced because he does not “look” trans.

An even further irony is that once a man is no longer visibly transsexual—that is, once his previous androgyny has been transformed to unquestionable masculinity—he may no longer be of interest to the press. I have had reporters at public events look right through me when directed to me as an expert or knowledgeable source. They do not wish to interview me because I do not look like a transsexual. Only after they somehow find out that I am a trans person are they interested in me, and then for my expertise, but for the tingling quizzicality they can enjoy when they stare at me, hardly hearing a word I say, and wonder how someone so male ever could have been a woman (Green, 1999, p. 123).

Lynn, who identifies as bi-gendered, also struggles with “the invisibility of being trans, but not blatantly trans.” At this point in time, Lynn does not plan on a surgical transition and she does not “come out freely as trans to anyone” (Lynn, personal communication). She also

finds it extremely difficult to explain his gender identity to others and also frustrating when people make assumptions about his identity. For Lynn, trans identity is about flexibility and fluidity, even if others assume it is simply about being visibly trans.

Trans identified individuals also have varied experiences surviving as both students and professionals. Working as an administrative assistant in a university queer concern's office, James has secured a position where his identity is accepted. If anything, as James related in his interview, students and others he encounters in his office, upon first meeting him, expect something completely different. "When students meet me and find out how I live, they are sometimes palpably disappointed. I am not some pierced, tattooed, cool person. I am nothing like that at all." By being, what he calls, "an assimilated transsexual man," who was able to transition and remain employed at the university, James experiences professional life in a way that is considerably different from other research participants. (James, personal communication).

Corey works in publishing and oversees the work of about eighty people. His co-workers know he is trans, are comfortable approaching him with their questions, and have no problems seeing him in the bathroom. While, for the most part, Corey enjoys the work he does, he sometimes feels he is being overworked because everyone else is married, has children, and comes in at 7 and leaves at 4, while he usually comes in at 9 and leaves around 8 and some days the building closes first and he is forced to leave (Corey, personal communication). In addition to his often-cumbersome workload, Corey's supervisor often makes misogynistic comments and, at times, encourages other workers to follow his example. Before Corey began working with this team, the 'other guys' allowed such misogyny pass. This is extremely difficult for Corey who refuses to fall into an encouraged role of misogyny and calls others out, including his supervisor, who do make inappropriate comments or harass other employees. Because of his actions, Corey's masculinity is often questioned, "What's your problem? Aren't you one of us?" (Corey, personal communication). Such situations are quite disheartening for Corey, who emphasizes the fact that one does not need to be a misogynist in order to identify as male. Even though

Corey is financially supported by this job, it is physically and emotionally exhausting for him to remain in an environment that wrongly challenges both his gender identity and feminist beliefs.

Without steady employment or other financial means, survival can be threatened greatly. Jennifer, who is partially finished with her thesis, a composition for orchestra, which would complete the requirements for her master's degree, is dealing with the strain of being unemployed. As a student, she is living in poverty as she is making less than \$12,000 a year. If Jennifer is unable to find a job, she will be forced to leave Chicago, move back to her rural hometown, and live with her parents. In doing this, she would leave her doctors and counsellor, would likely be unable to find suitable medical care, and would possibly even have to discontinue taking hormones. Jennifer cannot even begin to comprehend what would happen if forced to stop hormones, tries not to think about it, and instead does her best to get out of bed, apply for jobs and hopes for the best.

While survival takes many forms, it is often times support from inside that is the true basis for survival. In Lynn's experience, when things began "spinning out of control" she had to turn within herself (Lynn, personal communication). Even though Lynn feels she has a "broad network of support," she still finds her greatest support from within. "I am self-reliant to the point that if I can't come to terms with myself then there is no way that I am going to be able to do anything" (Lynn, personal communication). Lynn finds that once she is able to deal with issues herself, she will be able to reach out to others more.

Pre-transition, James also reached inside himself for support. "How I supported myself was to never talk about it with anyone and to just dream my little dreams. In my fantasy world, I was this hot, tan guy who could have any girl he wanted" (James, personal communication). Even when in a relationship, James experienced great difficulties discussing his identity with his partner. "When I was with a female partner who was very invested in her lesbian identity, I never talked about it again to her after I told her I thought I was a guy. This was the beginning of the end for her and way too hard for me to talk about

after that. We didn't make it," (James, personal communication). Regardless of the circumstances, James found it easier to turn within himself for the greatest level of support.

Even though James spent lengthy periods of his life only relying strictly on himself for support, he has always had great family support. While it was difficult for her at first, James's mother, after giving her time to grieve, which James fully supported, has grown to be one of his greatest supporters. His wife and daughter have always supported James, who was married in the summer of 2004. In addition, James also has an extremely supportive stepmother, younger brother, and sister-in-law. Despite having the support of many, some of James's family members have struggled and found his transition difficult to understand.

"They call me my female name behind my back. They make jokes about it to my mother. They have been judging, scared, and mostly used it against me to keep me away from the kids so that I won't make them gay. Funny thing is I'm not gay. I'm a man who has always been attracted to women. For them, though, I am this messed-up woman who digs other women, like, a lesbian. They will not let it go or consider that the world is grey instead of black and white" (James, personal communication).

While it is difficult for James to have members of his family who are upset and confused, he does not regret having transitioned and would have done it all the same, even without the support of his family. Overall James is grateful for the family he does have and for those who love him not matter how he presents himself.

As Jennifer sees it, her parents are the only support system she has left. While she is becoming increasingly close to her mother, her father, a pastor in rural area, still needs time to come to terms with her identity. Previously, Jennifer's greatest supporter was her sister-in-law, but her mother is beginning to take on this role. As Jennifer notes, "I can cry to her and just get out my frustrations. It's wonderful feeling like a daughter with a mother. She still is trying to deal with the issue but she doesn't show it when she's around me or talking to me" (Jennifer, personal communication). At times when Jennifer is the most needy, her

mother works to do whatever she can to support her daughter, thus making Jennifer's struggles somewhat easier.

Medical care, including counselling or therapy, medication and hormonal treatment, surgical consultations and procedures, are vital components to the survival of many trans individuals. At the same time, many transpeople, including two of my research participants, are opting to live without gender affirming care. Both Jennifer and Corey noted that medical services, especially those offered by queer supportive medical and mental health providers in the Chicagoland area, are vital to their survival. When faced with the possibility of leaving Chicago, Jennifer realizes the importance medical care and counselling.

"The health center is so helpful to me... Chances are, if I move back to my hometown, I might only get counselling once a month, at best, and I have no idea what to do about medical services. When I asked my first doctor if he could help prescribe me hormones, he asked if I needed a depression medication. If I have to stop taking hormones, I really don't know what will happen" (Jennifer, personal communication).

Without the gender affirming care that she has in Chicago, it is difficult to know what options Jennifer will have and how her survival will be affected.

For Corey, insurance coverage plays a major role in securing gender-affirming care. For insurance purposes, he has been unable to legally change his name. This is one of the more minor problems, as he sees it, that he has had with insurance. Because his family has a history of ovarian and uterine cancer, Corey was scheduled to have a hysterectomy. Three days before surgery, the insurance company called to inform him that they would not be paying for "gender reassignment." Corey was forced to wait several months before finally having the surgery. In the mean time, his gynaecologist found a cyst and a tumour, the cause of the abdominal pain that Corey had been experiencing for months. It was only then that his insurance provider agreed to pay for the procedure. Since his hysterectomy, Corey's insurance provider has been denying the majority of claims that he submits. After going to the emergency room with bronchitis and pneumonia, Corey went to the pharmacy

to pick up his prescription for antibiotics. Even then, he was informed that insurance refused to pay for the medication because it was for “gender reassignment.” Only after his doctor contacted the insurance provider was the prescription covered. Corey is blown away by the fact that insurance pays for his testosterone, but denies most other claims. For trans identified individuals, survival, whether it is professionally, financially, personally, or medically, is a never-ending task.

Activism

While it is impossible to forget the everyday challenges and violence to which transpeople are continually subjected, transpeople often find it important to work to further strengthen both personal and community efforts. As Prosser (1995) notes, “‘Trans’ is seen to symbolize what queerness most privileges...unfixed identity, mobile trajectory, unceasing movement...the borders between genders, disturbs the discrete categories of lesbian, gay men, woman [and] enables the formulation of new political, cultural, and social coalitions” (p. 486). As demonstrated by my participants, everyday life is activism and activism is part of everyday life. As an assimilated transsexual man, James believes his activism is:

Trying to live a life of compassion and action. It's to come out as the trans-man I am. It's to say, yes, I'm an old, balding, boring man, but I am also a queer. I had a whole life before this life, and I fought for the right to become who I am...sometimes, activism is just living simply and telling the truth. People are afraid of the truth, just look at them, but sometimes after they get the truth they are fine. They learn something they didn't know, and they become allies to a movement that is more about difference than about being the same as 'straight' western world (James, personal communication).

Much of James’ activism is about just being who he is, even if that means being a boring, married, heterosexual, employed, balding, middle-class queer.

For Jennifer, activism is something trans people do out of necessity. As a teen, Jennifer felt extremely alone because there were not enough safe spaces for trans

identified teens. Because of this, Jennifer was personally motivated to become active in support groups for trans teens, with the hopes of easing some of the pain and loneliness that others face. Now that she is transitioning, Jennifer has realized the need “to pull away from activism more” (Jennifer, personal communication). Having given so much to her community, Jennifer feels it is now time to do more for herself. “A lot of transitioning is really just learning to give to oneself. Our whole lives we've been giving to everyone else, being the fantasy children/spouses/siblings/students that people want us to be, hiding it to avoid their discomfort, while the whole time we spent our childhoods in pain and loneliness” (Jennifer, personal communication). After supporting many others, Jennifer is taking the time to care of herself as she transitions.

At his university, James not only works to support other queer individuals, but also helps to create a new generation of activists with his students.

My students are activists, and I love to help them become activists, especially when they didn't know that they were going to be activists...The world is not right and it's about way more than queers. There are so many injustices out there that we don't even have time to name them all, let alone work on them all. But, we instil in our students the basic beliefs about social justice and teach them to spot the inequities all by themselves. They create the activism, and low and behold, the activist is created from that. Strong beliefs. Shock. Seeing with different eyes. Being introduced to oppressed people. Experiencing discrimination first-hand for the first time. All of that pain goes toward helping create activism (James, personal communication).

By helping to open the eyes of his students and encouraging them to get involved in their communities, James's activism transcends boundaries and reaches beyond the issues of queer and trans communities.

Lynn, who is currently a university student, is an example of the activist involvement that James encourages. Coming from a high school which had very little support for queer students, Lynn was excited about the idea of not only being personally involved in his university's queer student group, but also about being able to bring all his friends with him.

Lynn also presented this group with the idea of forming a network with other city and state colleges and universities queer organizations in which to share information, organize events, and coordinate state-wide activism. This idea was well received by others in the group and Lynn was named chair of the newly created outreach program that connects various university groups throughout the state of Illinois.

Educational outreach and public speaking are both major components of trans activism. “Many of us who have contributed have written small autobiographical pieces of ourselves within our contributions. We do this because we are all activists; we know the power of not disappearing when being trans. Within the academy, we choose not to vanish, because we choose power over fear” (Whittle, 1999, p. 9). By sharing their personal experiences with others, trans individuals reach out beyond their communities, foster understanding, and often begin to create change. Both Corey and James are active public speakers and take great pride in sharing their lives with the hopes of educating others. When he began transitioning, Corey was extremely active in a drag king troupe. At performances, he was not only presenting himself on stage, but also answering any questions that audience members had for him. As part of their shows at local colleges and universities, Corey was also part of a panel of individuals who would answer various questions his experiences with drag and his gender identity. By being a visible member of the Chicago queer community who is willing to educate others about gender, trans identity and transitioning, Corey helps his community to better understand trans issues. Since beginning his transition, Corey has become more of an activist, through educating others and just being a visible transman. He has also begun speaking to university classes and at other community events and is looking to move his activist work more in this direction. His current project is a collective performance effort by area artist groups. With this project, Corey hopes to combine his love of performance art and his desire to give back to the community in order to create a performance that will benefit various charities.

Feminism

Feminism has always thought about questions of life and death... it asks how we organize life, how we accord it value, how we safeguard it against violence, how we compel the world, and its institutions, to inhabit new values, means that its philosophical pursuits are in some sense one with the aim of social transformation. (Butler, 2004, p. 205).

Transpeople are often those who are endlessly fighting for social change. Despite tensions that have existed and continue to exist between trans and feminist communities, it is important to understand how transpeople view feminism and how they themselves, despite their gender identity and the negative and hateful works against them, are indeed feminists.

To Brandon, feminism is a charged word with a “man-hating connotation” that, at least by dictionary definition, means that women should have equal rights and be treated, not as special, but as equal. Even though Brandon definitely sees the feminist point of view, it is difficult for him to identify to outwardly identify as a feminist because it is such a charged issue. Despite this, Brandon does state, when specifically asked, that he is a feminist. Lynn has similar problems with the feminist label. In her early understanding, feminism was all about women who hate men, want to burn their bras, and never shave. At the same time, she knew that was not feminism at its core. Recently Jennifer has begun to re-evaluate feminism. As much as she wants to believe that feminism is a worthwhile cause, she is unable to do so unconditionally because of the disrespectful critique of trans individuals by feminists.

I feel that people in the feminist community, like any community, can have a way of falling off message. I feel that the harsh criticism and unforgiving persecution that sometimes comes from feminism, especially when directed towards the transgender community, does not benefit anyone. Since feminism is largely about logic, reasoning, and understanding of who we are as human beings (women AND men), I

would think that we could approach these things with respect to others (Jennifer, personal communication).

Jennifer also questions feminism because she feels challenges to the gender binary need to be recognized, because men and women are not the only genders. As much as she wants to belong to the feminist community, Jennifer finds it difficult to be part of a community that often fails to recognize and respect her as an individual. Despite her reservations, Jennifer says she is indeed a feminist, but is unable to be an active member of any feminist community because she is taking the time to focus on herself and is unsure as to her place within this community.

Since beginning his transition, Corey states, "I am more a feminist now than I was before! I see the clear difference between the two gender roles" (Corey, personal communication). Instead of being worried about being outed as trans, Corey now worries about being beaten up because he was sticking up for women.

"Without thinking, sometimes when I am in a men's restroom and some guy will say something and I will go all diva...and they just have that blank stare...and then I'm just like...I've gotta go. I'm worried that I am going to be sticking up for women and I am going to get my ass kicked" (Corey, personal communication).

While Jeffreys and Raymond believe that FTMs choose to transition because they want to "feel powerful over and dominate women in relationships, and to feel superior to women" (Jeffreys, 2003, p. 143), this is not the case, in Corey's situation. Sometimes he will notice his female partner taking on a subordinate role and refuses to accept it. He instead encourages her to actively communicate with him rather than falling back on gendered expectations or behaviours.

Don't play this whole I'm a guy you're a girl deal because it doesn't fly with me. Don't think that I am the decision maker. If I ask you where you want to go or what you want to do tonight it is because I care. Don't think that I am the decision maker...She's mentioned to me that she's communicated more with me than any partner she's ever had and I think it's just because I don't want assumed behaviours

or roles to come out. I want someone to be natural and comfortable and who they are as well as with their interactions with me. I can totally tell if someone is being fake instead of totally getting comfortable with me (Corey, personal communication). By choosing open communication and shared decision making, Corey continually refuses to abuse the power that is more often than not associated with male privilege.

James also believes that women need to be treated with the utmost respect and compassion, but this was not always the case. Before transitioning, James thought that in order to be a man you had to be a tough chauvinist and cruel to women. It was through women's studies courses and being surrounded by women that James learned to be compassionate and respectful to all women. Now James realises that feminism is all over his life and that he is indeed a feminist. "What this world needs most are men who have permission to give up on the cult of masculinity and allow themselves to just be along the human spectrum. They will be able to help women achieve...they will raise respectful, feminist sons and daughters that feel they can do anything (James, personal communication). It is through their respect and compassion for not just women but all people that these trans individuals are truly feminists.

Even though trans identified individuals devote significant amounts of time to safety and survival, they are still able to dedicate a considerable amount of time and effort to activism and even feminism. These individuals are neither working as agents of the patriarchy, nor are they upholding gendered expectations. Instead, they are actively working to strengthen themselves as individuals and are eagerly seeking ways to enhance the communities in which they live.

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