Indexing androgyny: The transgendered phenomenon and its challenge to ethnology

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INDEXING ANDROGYNY: THE TRANSGENDERED PHENOMENON

AND ITS CHALLENGE TO ETHNOLOGY

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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1990

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of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

INDEXING ANDROGYNY: THE TRANSGENDERED PHENOMENON
AND ITS CHALLENGE TO ETHNOLOGY

by

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Dr. William Jankowiak, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Anthropology
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This thesis will focus on the life experiences of transsexual individuals living in the Las Vegas community. This is an ethnographic study that includes field research, extensive interviews, and library research.

Through this study I hope to gain better insight as to what motivated these individuals to seek surgical sex reassignment. I wish to explore the similarities and differences between preoperative transsexuals and other transgendered persons, and I hope to tie the experiences of local transsexuals to the experiences of transsexuals in other parts of America in order to determine if there are any social or environmental conditions that may affect transsexuality, such as the availability of estrogen or the degree of acceptance of alternative gender roles within a community.
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CHAPTER ONE

Prologue

During a recent faculty meeting at an urban University in the Southwestern United States, the members of a certain department within the College of Arts and Sciences were gathered to discuss the course offerings for the semesters ahead. The staff had decided to create four new courses to cover the burgeoning field of gender studies. One professor sat shaking his head, dismayed at what he was hearing.

“How many genders are there, anyway?” he asked.

“Six,” replied the person beside him.

“As many as ten in the middle ages,” added another.

*****

“That’s the craziest thing I ever heard,” a professor once laughed when the concept of “third gender” was presented in a graduate seminar. “There is not such thing as a third gender! You have man, you have woman; there’s no in between! That concept is just absurd.”

Yet the onslaught continues.

Faculty members who only twenty years ago spent their lunch hour debating the make of Custer’s gun and pondering if Herrick rightfully belonged in the “canon” had first been stunned by Derrida, then blind-sided by Foucault and dominated by Daly. Though seemingly silenced by the politically correct banners of the nineties—namely “feminism” and “multiculturalism”—many of the old guard now stand in silent amaze as the new sets out to paint the ivory tower...

lavender.

1

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Introduction: One Plus One Equals Six

The interplay between transsexuality and transgenderism on one hand and contemporary Western society on the other is as controversial and tabooed a topic as it is persistent in popular discourse. Transvestites and transsexuals are paraded before the public on daytime talk shows next to dogs balancing on balls and men who act like babies with the women who change their diapers. On the street, these people are usually awkward yet politely accepted—until their back is turned. If their looks or mannerism do not give them away, their drivers licence assuredly will.

This thesis is a pilot study, an ethnographic account of the lives of several male-to-female transsexuals living in the Western United states. I have far to go before I will consider myself an authority on transsexualism. Even after years of association, I must admit that I am not always good myself at perceiving a transsexual. I tend to be credulous and naive when it comes to gender, and confess to being quite taken in by The Crying Game. My first encounter with a transsexual was in Kansas City, Missouri, where I worked as a typesetter for a local copy shop. There was one individual who came in frequently, often late at night, and rented one of our computers. She was a tall, soft-spoken “lass,” proud of her Scottish heritage. I once told her that she looked a lot like Christine McVie, and with that comment I could have made a lifelong friend: her smile was radiant as she laughed in reply, and in thick British accent informed me that she used to live within a few miles of McVie in Scotland. I cannot remember this person’s name, though I would love to talk to her now, to listen to the story of how she came to America and how she had proceeded through the “crossover.” But then, I knew nothing of transsexuality and was blind to its often obvious signs. It was not until the cashier came and let me in on the fact that “her” drivers license proclaimed “she” a “he” that I
fully realized what was going on. Then, as with *The Crying Game*, I was not really surprised to learn the “truth.” Instead of thinking, “Oh my God, she is???” the sentiment was more, “Well, of course! It only makes sense…”

This thesis will illustrate that we are, all of us, blinded by culture. Anthropologists have repeatedly shown how gender, like language, is almost entirely a cultural construction (see Herdt 1993 (1984), 1997; Weston 1993). As we are enculturated to conform to one of two sexes, so are we coerced into believing that gender always reflects sex: that long hair, breasts, and dresses are to the vagina as short hair, muscles, and pants are to the penis. These stereotypes are breaking down. As “androgyny” is increasingly becoming fashionable in popular culture, the door is opening for transgendered people such as transsexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, and homosexuals to come out of the closet and try to eke out a social niche that is deserving of some respect and even admiration. But cultural conditioning in America—especially to those of us of more “conservative” political and religious sects—prohibits us from allowing these people even the most basic of dignities. We have been blind to the special and important contributions these persons can and have made to societies around the world and throughout history.

The Beginning

I met my primary consultant for this study, whom I will call by the pseudonym Marty Gomez, over a game of pool in a bar near the UNLV campus, three years ago. My first remembrance is of her leaning over a pool table at the back of the bar. She was dressed in what I’ve heard a drag artist describe as “Daisy Dukes”: tight and revealing blue denim cutoffs with a split up the side which left very little to the imagination. She wore a red and white checkered blouse with the tails tied together in the front, revealing a smooth and slender groin, as flat as the proverbial pancake. Despite her dress and
demeanor, I was suspicious that she was a cross-dresser, or possibly even transsexual. She was boyish in her manner and aggressive on the stick, and she had a commanding tone and eye. She was with her boyfriend, whom I call Kevin. He was a lean guy, probably a student by look, dressed in tight faded jeans and a plain white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It was clear that they were a couple.

As I was new in town and in a neighborhood (gay) bar, I decided to introduce myself to the locals. I was drawn to Marty as she reminded me of a friend back home, a particularly androgynous Native American named Alonzo. So I put my quarters on the table, challenging the winner to a game. Marty did not give me a warm reception, and she gave me daring looks as she became more determined to win the game against Kevin, probably lest he should have to play me. Whereas she had been in a joking and flirtatious mood before my interjection, she was now stern and cool, and she played a fast game until scratching on the eight ball. Seeing me play against Kevin was the last thing that she wanted, so she thought that by revealing her transsexual identity, she would scare me away.

"You wouldn't like us," she told me coyly after we had played a few games. "I'm not really a woman." I tried not to let on to my lack of amazement. And contrary to her intent, instead of being disinterested I asked if I could interview her; would she tell me her story. Seeming flattered, she assented, and she and Kevin became my first and best friends in Las Vegas.

As a postmodern ethnographer, I should also address what has drawn me to the study of transgendered persons. I must admit that transgendered persons for a long time made me very nervous. I did not wish to fault them for their lifestyle, but I found them particularly offensive because they represented that which I had tried to repress in myself: my femininity. As treasurer of the Society for Lesbians and Gays in Anthropology, and an affiliate of the ONE Institute in Los Angeles, it is fair to say that I am "out"
in my profession. However, I have long been reluctant to embrace the term "gay" as definitive of my identity or to have that identity thrust upon me.

As an adolescent in high school, I was especially careful to mask any trace of feminine behavior, lest my classmates should guess at my social and sexual proclivities. I came out when I was 16 years old and started socializing among the gay community during my junior year. It was then that I met my first "drag queens", and most importantly, my androgynous friend, Alonzo.

Alonzo is one of the most aggressively friendly persons in the gay community of Lincoln, Nebraska. He was teasingly referred to as "Sister Marguerite, the Chaste and Pure" among his cloister of close associations. He had the strong and supple body of a well-formed lad, but he also the long, flowing black hair of a Spanish belle. He ran daily and was easily the fleetest of my friends, but "inside," he was all woman. I have seen him grieve openly in public on several occasions. In dress and manner, talk and style, s/he was part man, part woman; part masculine, part feminine—an amalgam of gender.

On some level he seems unaware of how the heads turn behind his passing, how many eyebrows as questions raised. At times, though, he was capable of great sadness where life became burdensome, and she was exhausted; for she was often scorned, laughed at, and scapegoated by his colleagues and advisors at work within the Nebraska Regional Center in Lincoln. A crazy among crazies, he has performed miracles within those cold stone walls of the institution, reaching out to patients that others have given up on. Through his androgyny, Alonzo has talents that none other could lay claim to. He is always among the first to "take down" a rampant inmate but also first to notice and to soothe a distraught soul. He was an asset to his "floor," being strong and aggressive when needed but calming and affectionate by nature. I have seen him come home with more scrapes and bruises, cuts and bites than I can count, yet his devotion for those in his care was steadfast. Alonzo has become as a sage to me, a best friend and a big sister,
teaching me compassion and empathy and the power of self-sacrifice. It is fair to say that I would not be the person I am today without having made his acquaintance, nor would this study ever have taken place.

As a boy, I learned early on to stifle my own innate androgyny. As an adolescent, I looked down on sissies, nerds, and wimps, and as teen coming out I avoided the presence of drag "queens," in or out of costume. It was through my friendship with Alonzo that I realized as a young adult what some people never come to acknowledge: that transgendered people exist in the world. They are every bit as much a product of nature as they are creatures of culture, having existed in every culture, in every time. They have particular talents that can and do benefit society at large, and American society would do well to embrace these individuals, allowing them the space to be themselves and to explore their unique identities.

Terms and Concepts

Much of this thesis will necessarily pertain to semantics. As this is an introductory study, it is especially important that I attempt to define the terms that I use—i.e. homosexual, gay, gender, androgyny, transsexual, and biological determinism—in detail. It is my hope that the reader will better understand the complexity of these terms while providing a grounding to the otherwise vague and general notions those terms connote in popular and academic cultures.

Homosexual

First, let me tackle the term homosexual, primarily to attempt to dismiss it (for purposes of this research). Through my experience, most transsexuals do not identify with the term. I have often been surprised at the great variation in the sexual behavior and preferences among the transsexual community, and so the use of the term homosexual—
referring to a person who prefers to engage in sexual acts with a person of the same sex—would trivialize a complex and varied behavioral identity. I have not yet met one transsexual who used the term to describe their subjective sense of self. I therefore decide not to use the term as a descriptor. This does not mean, however, that sexual identity and practices will be omitted from the discussion, and further papers will address this issue in depth.

**Gay**

The term "Gay" is also nebulous and used in a hodgepodge of different contexts. For some, "Gay" and "Homosexual" are the same thing, and are understood as being the polar opposite of "heterosexual" or "straight." But "gay" is much more that just the opposite of straight. Gay indeed denotes a man or woman who prefers to have sexual relations with members of the same gender affiliation or sex, depending on social situation. But gay is also glee, glory, pride, rainbows, and even weddings, and these are not things counter to the predominant straight culture. Only when gay is contrasted to straight does it take on the nefarious and hedonistic characteristics attributed to it by the Christian Coalition and religious leaders like Pat Robertson and that infamous Kansas attorney Fred Phelps.

Transsexuals tend to be uncomfortable with the term yet are unable to dismiss it completely. When asked if they felt affiliated with the gay community, transsexuals unfailingly replied that they felt an allegiance. Thousands of transsexuals have "come out" within the gay community, where they have received an awkward and uncertain acceptance within the gay bar culture. While two of the four consultants in this study were bar-goers, they were most often seen on the fringes, lurking in dark corners. I met Marty, my primary consultant, in a gay bar, and many on the UNLV campus recognized Marty and her boyfriend, Kevin, as a heterosexual, gender-typic couple. They had met
each other in a gay bar while Kevin was bartender. Both have ties to the gay community that extend for years, yet neither of them self-identify as gay.

Gender

While this term signifies one of the most controversial issues in popular and academic spheres, “gender” connotes too many things to too many people to be used effectively without clarification.

According to transgender historian Bernice Hausman (1995),

gender was first produced as a concept in 1955 to describe how an intersex child came to establish particular behaviors that would indicate its assigned sex: in its first usages, gender was modified by the words “role” or “orientation.” The idea of a gender orientation or role was later understood as the behavioral or performative counterpart of a “gender identity” thought to motivate the subjects’ actions. Subsequently, in the context of research on transsexualism, the idea of gender identity came to signify appropriate bodily sex: that is, what sex the subject should be allowed to have. (187)

While this etymology of gender helps to support Hausman’s point that the transsexual phenomenon is merely a technological attempt to enforce biologically determined gender roles, I suggest that the concept of gender emerged from the humanities in general and anthropology in particular. Margaret Mead’s conception of “temperament,” for instance, is a direct antecedent to the concept of “gender.” Consider Mead’s observation: “In the division of labor, in dress, in manners, in social and religious functioning—sometimes in only a few of these respects, some times in all—men and women are socially differentiated, and each sex, as a sex, forced to conform to the role assigned to it” (1963 [1935] xi). The concept of “sex role”—i.e., gender—thus predates the use of the concept by endocrinologists and psychologists, and thus problematizes her claim “that ‘gender’ as a term was part of a new discourse on sex made possible by technological advances in medicine” (184). Rather than consider gender as a red-herring concept invented by the
"transsexual empire" of scientists and surgeons in effort to subvert and invade the territory of "woman" (see Raymond 1979 and also Hausman 1995), I perceive the concept of gender to be more useful as first described by Mead and other early ethnologists of temperament.

Sex

One of the fundamental assumptions in Western culture is that there exist only two sexes: male and female. Sexual dimorphism is taught in high schools all across North America as the complex variations of human sex are simplified for the cultural palate. Whereas students of elementary biology everywhere learn of the proper dimorphic chromosomal karyotype: XX = girl, XY = boy, endocrinologists have confounded such a simplistic notion of sexual dimorphism. In the fourth edition *Textbook of Endocrinology* (1968), Justin Van Wyk and Melvin M. Grumbach published on the great variety of chromosomal possibilities. They further complicate the relationship between genotypic and phenotypic characteristics of "sex" by distinguishing seven factors to be considered in the ontogeny of sexual characteristics: Chromosomal sex, sex chromatin, gonadal sex, genital ducts, external genitalia, hormonal sex, and gender role (1968:538). They further maintain that karyotypic mosaicism is far more common that generally known and illustrate in detail how the underlying chromosomal factors were far too complex to isolate one genotypic causal factor for phenotypic variation. Sex has thus become a spectrum of genetic possibilities.

While chromosomal sex is the prime mover (genotype) for the (phenotypic) physical characteristics, gender itself was *entirely* banished from the biological realm. Van Wyk and Grumbach believed gender role to be "neuter at birth"; it is through parenting and socialization that every person learns his or her "Social comportment; mannerisms and dress, direction of sex drive" (1968:568).
In our culture the distinction between male and female is expected to be absolute, and these terms are often used to epitomize opposites. Usually the components of an individual's sexual makeup are indeed dominantly of one gender and conform to the chromosomal pattern established in the zygote at the time of fertilization. Most sexual characteristics, however, emerge from bipotential precursors in the embryo and a spectrum of differentiation is possible at each level of sexual organization. (537)

But this is to consider sex as a biological mechanism only. Berkeley historian Thomas Laqueur has a different take on the concept of sex. Inspired by Foucault, Laqueur (1990) brilliantly illustrates how “sex” is a dynamic cultural construct that a long and fascinating history. Hausman (1995) and Raymond (1979) consider historical aspects of “sex” in their works, as well.

**Androgyny**

No one has championed androgyny more than Sandra Bem. Bem (1974:155) introduced a third option to the gender dimorphism paradigm: “that many individuals might be ‘androgynous’; that is, they might be both masculine and feminine.” Bem argues as a feminist that “our current system of sex role differentiation has long since outlived its usefulness, and that it now serves only to prevent both men and women from developing as full and complete human beings.” She goes so far as to celebrate androgyny as a new standard of psychological well-being, stating that people “should be encouraged to be both instrumental and expressive, both assertive and yielding, both masculine and feminine—depending upon the situational appropriateness of these various behaviors” (Bem 1975:634).

**Transsexual**

Hausman suggests that “like homosexuality, transsexuality is a category of experience and identity that can be read as a result of specific social and cultural conditions” (3).
Her book *Changing Sex* firmly establishes that transsexualism is only possible with the advent of the modern medical procedures. Yet many are not in agreement with Hausman's assessment. In the *City of Friends* (1995), for instance, Levy and Nonan write: "there are many reasons for emphasizing that surgery is not the centerpiece of transsexuality. First, transsexuality has existed in many, perhaps all cultures, long before the first sex-change operation" (183). Hausman's definition of "transsexual" clearly challenges this reasoning.

Ed Viola, who manages a transsexual hot-line in New York city, stated: "The defining characteristic of the transsexual is their undeniable desire to surgically correct their biological incongruency" (1997:12). Following Viola, I will call "transsexual" any person who has employed modern medical technology to alter their physical bodies, be it through hormones or surgery. These people seek sexual reassignment surgery because, as my consultant Melinda Whiteway put it, they share "this conviction that they belong to a sex that was different than their bodies demonstrated." However, I am uncomfortable with Levy and Nonan's assertion that transsexuality is ubiquitous in history and culture.

The terms thus defined will be encountered in various contexts, with many speakers utilizing the term to evoke a barrage of social connotations and criticisms. Other scholars use these terms to promote different agendas. For instance, when Feinberg applies the term "male-to-female" or "female-to-male" to describe a shaman, she blurs the distinction between transsexual and transgender, calling them "trans people" (47). At times, scholars conflate sex with gender, though most of the time the terms remain as distinct and oppositional. As I will demonstrate, the ideology that we could separate sex from gender has had profound and often nefarious ramifications when imposed on human beings. As anthropologist David Valentine puts it, "The new
circumstances under which we are placed call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old worlds to new objects” (personal communication).

**Biological Determinism**

Scholars may dance with the concept of multiple genders and flirt with the notion of gender-as-spectrum, but the legal reality of the term is much aligned with Hausman. At every level American government, in every bureaucracy, major and minor, there are, in fact, two “genders,” as there are two distinct “sexes.” The terms are often conflated in popular discourse. Witness any drivers license application, birth certificate, or prison record. Whether the category be labeled “sex” or “gender,” there are two check boxes: Male and Female. Biological determinism is, without doubt, a fundamental tenet in Western culture. As Margaret Mead noted in her seminal *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935):

> Our own society... assigns different roles to the two sexes, surrounds them from birth with an expectation of different behaviors, plays out the whole drama of courtship, marriage, and parenthood in terms of types of behavior believed to be innate and therefore appropriate for one sex or for another. (xi–x)

Even scholars in the more “hard” sciences recognize the pervasiveness of the popular myth of sexual dimorphism. As endocrinologists Van Wyk and Grumbach noted in 1968: “In our culture the distinction between male and female is expected to be absolute, and these terms are often used to epitomize opposites” (537). Stanford Psychologist Sandra Bem called this process of gender role assignment “sex typing” and devised a scale by which psychologists could determine the degree to which an individual was properly “sex typed” or else had rejected that typing to become more or less androgynous (1974, 1975)
Overview

This thesis describes a people whose history have been stolen from them. It is about a group of humans that, cross-culturally, is occasionally held sacred but more often is perceived as vulgar and profane. Though the number of consultants may be few, this study will cover a lot of conceptual ground. It chronicles the struggle of three members of an obscure Las Vegas minority, a group of loosely networked transgendered persons who live lives that are considered by the legal establishment to be illegitimate and fraudulent. Chapter two will introduce my primary consultant, Marty Gomez, and illustrate how she exemplifies androgyny through her performative behavior under public and demanding social circumstances. In an analysis that is part ethnographic, part linguistic, and part performative/symbolic, I will attempt to demonstrate the intricacies of androgyny, highlight its strengths and its limitations in the real social world that Bem has idealized from the realm of clinician.

Whereas Bem devised a scale by which she indexes psychological androgyny, this thesis will use linguistic data to identify and evaluate the pragmatics of androgyny as exemplified by my primary consultant, Marty. Chapter two will explicate androgyny, exemplifying it through Marty's behavior, manner of speech, and manipulation of symbols in a fast paced retail environment. Chapter three demonstrates the consequences of sex-typing on the androgyne, considered through the narratives of two transsexuals who have faced death and emerged through a cathartic rebirth. Contrary to the observations of Anne Bolin (1988) who found transsexuals in Denver to be antagonistic towards the notion of androgyny, these narratives show that instead of a rite-of-passage whereby a man can become as woman, or woman as man, some transsexuals take a different path: from a desire to cross from one sex to another to a contentment to be somewhere "in the middle." This chapter addresses the consequences of androgyny. In Western culture, the androgyne has been killed or emasculated, held in ridicule, con-
tempt, and disdain. I use the methodology of New York linguist William Labov, as
developed in his study of Black Vernacular English in American's urban cities. He ad-
dressed specifically the "Danger of Death" question, asking if the consultant had ever
been in a situation where they felt as though they had confronted death. Anthropologist
Renato Rosaldo (1986) found Labov's analytical terms useful for analyzing Ilongot hunt-
ing narratives, expanding on Labov's categories while demonstrating important caveats.

I found Labov's categories useful for explicating the narratives of two of my
consultants, Marty and Melinda. Marty's story will be introduced in chapter two.
Melinda is a male-to-female transsexual living in Santa Cruz, California, who has main-
tained the support of her community as she transitioned, after two marriages and living
over 50 years as a male (personal interview; see also Bryant 1997). While Marty and
Melinda come from drastically different social climates, they have in common these
stories where they had faced death and survived. The options were quite clear: transi-
tion, or die. When I asked Melinda if she thought her transsexualism was a result of her
biology, she regretfully said, yes. She then quickly added this lament:

I wouldn't want to force this on somebody, you know, and it would be
nice if someone could choose to be transgendered—really truly, truly
choose it. None of us freely choose it; I mean, it's a choice between life
and death, in most cases, as it was for me.

In contrasting the narratives of Marty and Melinda, I hope to convey the harsh
realities of the transgendered experience. These stories demonstrate the consequences of
the ideology of sexual dimorphism allied with biological determinism on individuals
who do not—cannot—live their prescribed gender roles/identities in a rigid, procrustean
society that only allows for dimorphic paradigms of sex and gender.

The two concluding chapters of this thesis will consider the transgendered
phenomenon as it exits in other cultures, to better assess our own cultural biases and
behaviors. For examples, I turn to the role of two-spirit people in many Native American
tribes; to the hijra of India, as described by anthropologist Serena Nanda; and the role of the travestis of Brazil as described by Don Kulick. Through this brief comparison, we find that stories similar to those of Marty and Melinda can be found in many societies, some with what might be considered better circumstances and some with worse. However, it certainly becomes evident that other cultures have a place for their transgendered populace; they have a social role that they may step into, regardless of status or stigma.

It should be stated at the outset that this is a preliminary case study. At the close of this thesis, I have included a brief note on my plans for further research and publications. I realize that with only one primary consultant and three acquaintances through interviews, my conclusions are not yet empirically supported and should best be though of a models to grow on in preparation for a more complete work on this subject.
CHAPTER TWO

On the pragmatics of an androgynous style of speaking
(from a transsexual's perspective)

Since the publication of Robin Lakoff’s *Language and the Woman’s Place* (1975), linguists have repeatedly shown that in Western culture one may discern two distinct, gender-based styles of communicating. Accordingly, Jennifer Coates has distinguished between two “distinct speech communities” (1986:117), and Deborah Tannen treats these dimorphic “conversational styles” as the products of different cultures (1996:5). Courtroom observations of O'Barr and Atkins suggest that what Lakoff has termed “women's language” is best described as “powerless language,” reflecting the “generally powerless position of many women in American society” (1980:94. See also Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O’Barr 1978). Men’s language is conversely understood as powerful language (i.e. Kiesling 1997, Coates 1997), characterized as more competitive and egoistic.

Following psychologist Sandra Bem, Coates has predicted that the “ideal” speaker “would be able to switch from assertiveness to tentativeness as circumstances required” (Coates 1986:vi). Individuals with the ability to switch between masculine and feminine styles of speaking should have certain advantages in today’s society, especially as regards the corporate arena. This paper will consider this notion of an androgynous style of speaking as exemplified by the conversational style used by a biological male who passes as a female in Las Vegas, Nevada, even under intense public scrutiny. It will
explore the pragmatics of an androgynous style of speaking as put to test in a fast paced retail environment.

The consultant for this case study is Marty Gomez, a preoperative transsexual who has had silicone breast implants for the past four years and has been on estrogen therapy a year longer. I have observed Marty at home and at work many times since meeting her two years ago and have interviewed her at length regarding her motivations and desires as she goes through what she terms “the cross over.” Today, Marty has no problem passing as female, and this is due as much to her use of language as to her silicon-sculpted figure and “exotic” personality, as I have twice heard her described by male acquaintances.

It is fair to say that Marty’s representation of a woman, which I perceive as a performative act in appeal for increased social acceptance and status, may be considered stereotypical and often hyper-feminine. However, as Coates reminds us, while crude binary reductionism may seem trite to the academic mind, “we should also remember that we belong to societies where the hegemonic ideologies represent gender as binary” (1997:126). Marty’s success in sales and her rapid advancement into management indicate that we should not underestimate the influence of gender stereotypes. As much as our sensibilities may loath it, Mead’s dictum still holds true: in most known cultures, “men and women are socially differentiated, and each sex, as a sex, forced to conform to the role assigned to it.” (1963 [1935]: xi)

Before I may address Marty’s experiences, it is necessary to distinguish between what has been called a masculine versus a feminine style of speaking. Women’s speech frequently includes the use of “empty” adjectives, such as “divine, charming, cute”; tag questions, such as don’t you think? or isn’t it?; and other hedges, words expressing uncertainty, like perhaps, “I wonder if…” “ya know?” (Graddol and Swan 1989:83). This style of speaking was perceived by Lakoff to expose feminine politeness and uncer-
tainty (1975). Other linguists followed, and the feminine style of speech has since repeatedly been portrayed as “indecisive, imprecise, or mitigated,” reflecting the lower status of women in society (Bonvillain 198).

This is not to say that there are no advantages to the feminine style of speaking. In accordance with the polite and cooperative nature of feminine discourse, the topics raised in the conversations of women’s groups may be discussed at length, often “for half an hour or more,” with women cooperatively turn-taking, chaining their comments to the topic at hand (Graddol and Swan 1989:82, citing Kalcik 1975. See Holmes 1995 on politeness strategies). Women tend to be “especially sensitive to their co-participants interest or “face” (Bonvillain 1993:198, citing Brown and Levinson 1987), and they fill gaps in conversational turn-taking in a manner more cooperative than intrusive. Discussion is often centered around a particular topic, a locus of unity whereby group cohesion is centered and conversation maintained. Women’s talk is thus collaborative, built on common themes and a sense of “shared understanding” (Coates 1996:56)

In many ways, the masculine style of speech is directly counter to and “opposite” from the feminine style. Men seem to “avoid self disclosure, and prefer to talk about more impersonal topics such as current affairs, travel or sport” (Coates 1997, 119). Men are prone to use stronger expletives, such as damn, shit, or worse, than woman’s “oh dear,” or “goodness” (though this particular gender gap, according to de Klerk (1997), is rapidly closing) (Coates 1987:108, citing Lakoff 1975). Whereas women are more likely to discuss a topic at length, men “jump from one topic to another, vying to tell anecdotes which center around themes of superiority and aggression” and are thus more concerned with promoting their own face over the needs of their interlocutors (Coates 1986:152. See also Tannen 1986; Kiesling 1997). Men’s discussions “consist of serial monologues” and “scrupulous adherence to a one-at-a-time floor,” as opposed to the “collaborative mode of conversational organization” preferred by females (Coates 1997:126).
These masculine and feminine speech patterns are thought to be the result of a social system that values the contribution of men over women and seeks to empower masculine authority while restricting or channeling influence of females. With this in mind, one might wonder why a biological male would ever aspire to be identified as female? The answer is obvious when the weight of Marty's stigma as an effeminate male is considered. Marty, originally named Pedro, was physically and emotionally abused by parents and stepparents throughout her childhood, largely in reaction to her effeminacy. She started dressing and acting like a "girl" about the time she was six years old. Her stepfather started calling her "faggot" by the time she was eight, and once he kicked her hard enough to land her in the hospital. Marty's stepmother was no better, having beaten her with a thorny rose switch, a garden hose, and even a board of lumber. When she fought back, pushing her pregnant stepmother to the floor after being struck in the face, she was incarcerated, at the age of fourteen, in the California Youth Authority, where her fight to define her own gender identity intensified and continued.

Throughout her four and a half years in the care of the institution, Marty resisted her psychologist's insistence that she identify with the masculine gender. Indeed, the more they tried to make her "a man," the more she insisted that she was "a woman" and the more determined she became to assume a feminine identity. For years, she was forced to conform to a masculine style of living that included dress, haircut, manner, and sexual orientation. She was released after an attempt at self castration, an event to be described at length in a separate paper. The Youth Authority ultimately relinquished, releasing her on the grounds that she was "gender dysphoric" and they did not have the means to treat that condition.

In the six years since her release, Marty has gradually but increasingly become more feminine. Breast implants and estrogen therapy are largely responsible for her passing as female, but to maintain the illusion, her language, intonations, gestures, and
manner of speaking have become intuitively feminine. Within the past four years, she has gone from appearing as an obvious and awkward-appearing cross-dressed male, to a stunning, elegant, and (dare I say it) well-endowed female.

Marty has long realized that the most challenging and important domain in which she “pass” would be her place of employment. Indeed, as Marty is status oriented and eager to succeed financially, she has targeted her persona specifically to this arena. Even while incarcerated, she has used every opportunity to learn and improve on “employability” and social skills. Despite her professionalism and training, Marty swears that her breasts have been the ticket into most of her employment situations, and her social standing dramatically improved in consequence. She has become a dynamic and successful salesperson, made more money, received more positive attention from both males and females, and been accepted into a broader social circle than she had ever been—or ever would be—as an effeminate male.

In an attempt to analyze Marty’s behavior and better understand her success at passing, I observed her behavior in public for examples of gendered style-switching. This became easy when she was hired by a photo imaging booth in one of the bustling shopping corridors that connect the casinos of the Las Vegas strip. Her job was to entice a potential client to pause on their way from keno to blackjack long enough to pose while she snapped a digital photograph of their face, which she pasted into a pre-selected visage of a supermodel or celebrity. There were hundreds of portraits for the client to choose from, most bearing the likeness of a hyper-masculine or ultra-feminine, scantily clad sex idol, often on the cover of a popular magazine. The results of this virtual transformation were displayed on several large monitors for passersby to see. As she manipulated and tweaked the image, Marty joked over a PA system with the client; the observing audience, themselves potential clients; and one other salesperson-interlocutor who also wore a microphone.
The interaction between Marty and one other salesperson in particular, a girl in her early twenties whom I will call Sarah, was especially entertaining to watch, and the two of them frequently attracted an audience of thirty or more, often jamming the bustling, neon-lit corridor. Once a client selected an image or scene, Marty and Sarah created elaborate stories about the persona which Marty displayed on the main screen, turn-taking as they fabricated fantasy scenarios. For example, for one newlywed couple, Marty started by creating individual portraits of the groom on the cover of Playgirl and the bride on Playboy. Sarah added that they had been introduced at a photo shoot. Next, Marty composed an image of them dressed in traditional wedding attire, and then, as she began to discuss the “hot honeymoon,” she placed them within the still she called “Nature Lovers,” which depicted a young and near-naked couple basking on a Bahaman shore.

Marty’s stories frequently involved status, success, and glamour. “Here she is, Little Miss Innocent,” she would begin, addressing the on-screen image of a young woman draped in a fluffy cotton towel. “Then she came to Vegas and voilà! She came out in red and black!” (Flash to client now dressed as leather dominatrix.) Sarah would follow Marty’s lead, complementing and building on the scenario, often using a process of repetition and parallelism Goodwin has called format tying (1990). Take, for example, the following turn:

Marty: Then they went on vacation to the Bahamas and look what she found on the beach!

Sarah: Woo-eee! She found a stud on the beach that day!

Goodwin noted that an extended sequence of format-tied exchange is structured “in an almost musical way” (179) and indeed, Marty and Sarah would often burst into song while Marty performed her electronic make-over:
Marty (singing): "This is the way we brush your teeth, brush your teeth, brush your teeth..."

Both (singing): "This is the way we brush your teeth here at [name of company]."

Marty felt that she was most effective when working in collaboration with an associate like Sarah. As she put it, "We have to be almost the same person. [Snaps fingers twice.] Have to be. And that's why we did a big thing on chemistry. We had to work well with each other. We had to be able to cue in to each other's calls... And that's the way it works. Sarah was good at that. She was real good."

Goodwin (1990) and Kulick (1993:521) have observed format tying in status negotiations and bouts of insulting (both ritual and real), where each exchange would repeat yet alter the previous statement "minimally in order to highlight opposition."

Here, format tying was used to create a fictional narrative in which the product was contextualized as an integral part of the clients' Las Vegas vacation, a memento by which to also remember their time on the big-screen and their virtual vacation to paradise. The technique was highly effective as Marty and Sarah consistently generated the highest sales in the store, and Marty was rapidly promoted to supervisor.

Even while acting alone, Marty was remarkably quick at setting people of both genders at ease as they posed before her camera. Through her magic, Marty could make virtually any boy into Han Solo and any girl a *Baywatch* beauty. With the click of a mouse, freckles were erased, hairlines proceeded, teeth and eyes whitened and gleamed. Any discrepancy in skin tone was blurred, and blemishes could be added or erased at will.

For female clients, Marty would compare her work to that of a cosmetician giving a make-over. "Women," she said, "want to feel beautiful. Women want glamour and compliments." Therefore, Marty would flatter their new appearance through what
have been termed *empty* descriptive modifiers, such as when she said, "See? You look like *yesterday,*" or "Isn't that *great?*" or "Hun, you look *fabulous.*" For women, who Marty perceives to value physical aesthetics, such terms would not be considered empty at all but signify a desirable state of being.

For male customers, Marty would shift from descriptive to active terms, such as when she cooed to a male client's scantily clad, muscle-bound visage standing astride a Harley: "Oh, big Daddy, I'm gonna go on a *ride* with you!" Marty was not afraid to use her sex appeal on men, often to the point blatant flirtation. If a man and his girlfriend/wife were posing together, she might flirt with the male through the female, as when she said, "Girl, you better hang on to him, because *my* finger doesn't have a ring." In flirting with the man, she also flattered the woman and thus cleared the way for a sale.

As has been seen, much of Marty's success may be attributed to her attention to the "face needs" of her clients (see Goffman 1967). Marty has a talent for making people feel attractive and accepted while minimizing the imposition of the need for a transaction. For these purposes, she frequently employed hedges and tag questions in a complex way as she strove to control the salesperson-interlocutor, the audience of potential clients, and the client at hand. "Would you like to see how you'd look as a Brunette today, Sweetie?" "This would look nice on a coffee mug, don't you think?" Sometimes she would direct a tag-question towards the audience: "This guy'd look great on the *cover of Playgirl,* wouldn't he?"

Though there was never a shortage of male posers, men as a rule did not *seem* as interested in looking great as they were in the "joke" of the image and in getting a good deal for their money. As men were not often drawn to the offer of a "free" make-over, Marty developed a promotion by which to catch their attention. She created a pair of large red dice which, after posing for the camera, the customer could roll for a chance to win a prize—usually a discount coupon towards the purchase of a "package." Of course,
the dice would be enticing to the female gamblers, too. As Marty explains it,
People do not see themselves coming to Vegas and buying photos. They come here to
gamble, and I needed to play on that. I figured that the best way to get them to sit on
that chair and buy a picture is to offer incentive—if they would sit down on this chair
and let us give them a free make-over on the computer screen, we'd give them a free roll
on our big red dice which I hand made myself, big, cute, oversized—they had no choice
but to want to roll. They all got real excited about the gambling and would be more
willing to sit in the chair and let us make them look good.

According to this reasoning, the dice should appeal to individuals on both
masculine and feminine levels at once. This is perhaps best exemplified in how she used
them. Marty would gently place the dice in the hands of a woman or girl, calling them
"soft" and "cute." With men, though, her behavior was markedly different. She would
often throw one of the dice at a man who was passing by, especially if she judged him
"wealthy or cute," challenging him to catch it and come play in her game. I never saw
her throw a dice at a woman or girl. Again, with men and boys, the emphasis was on
action, and if the guy would agree to just sit still for just one minute, she would let him
roll for a chance to win a free picture of himself—on the cover of Men's Fitness, if he'd
like.

Because of the different ways that Marty would use her dice, I began to see
them—and her—in a slightly different light. In accordance with Lakoff, I had deter-
mined to keep an eye out for style switching—that is, times when Marty could be per-
ceived as acting distinctly "masculine" as opposed to times she was "feminine." And I
could often make such a distinction. However, most usually, Marty's "gender switching"
did not happen in nicely delineated segments. I could not easily determine when she
had "crossed the line." Indeed, if there was a line, she often seemed to straddle it. In
watching Marty work with her dice, I began to see them not as distinctly masculine or
feminine, but with aspects of both: a locus of androgyny. They certainly had a transgendered appeal, representing both action and aesthetics. But never were they the distinct territory of one gender or the other.

Once I began to see the dice in this manner, my perception of Marty began to change. Influenced by my research on transsexuals, or people who were in the process of “switching” from one gender category to the other, I encountered Marty as a person who was nearly through the process, or almost a full-fledged social female. She was, after all, fooling hundreds of people, on a daily basis. Still, just as the dice were neither entirely masculine nor feminine, Marty herself was somehow in the middle, sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine, never entirely effeminate but certainly never “butch.” Consider, for example, how Marty used hedges and tag questions—features commonly found in association with women’s or powerless language—in order to elicit a desired response and maintain control of the stage and situation—she thus used “feminine language” in a masculine way. Conversely, her style of format-tying, which has been perceived by linguists as often used in a more masculine and combative way, was used to foster group cohesion and inclusion, which is more characteristic of women’s speech. In effect, she was turning my expectations of what would constitute women’s versus men’s speech upside-down!

Then, during one of the interviews in which we discussed my observations and her performance in the mall, Marty herself credited her success to her ability to “style shift.” She called this her “number one skill,” boasting, “I can go to this person and have this personality and then with the next person, change my hat and become a different person just for them. I can shift roles at the drop of a dime. I can give them all what they want that way.” This is in accordance with Bem’s hypothesis that, to her or his advantage, “the androgynous individual should be able to remain sensitive to the changing constraints of the situation and engage in whatever behavior seems most effective at the
moment, regardless of its stereotype as appropriate for one sex or the other” (1975:634–635). Marty’s success at style-shifting illustrates that this is indeed so.

But sometimes, her style misfired, and Marty came off looking like a typical, high-pressure salesman. She was often aggressive in her manner, never afraid to ask for a sale or counter a denial. Her employer commented that she “had a comeback for everything” and counted this her greatest asset. But to some, the effect was perceived as domineering. After all, a sugarcoated directive is still a directive. Though Marty was consistently feminine in her manner, sometimes she became aggressive, overbearing, and distinctly unladylike.

Marty was usually a success at passing. She could stand on stage and pass as a woman before thousands of people, for hours at a time. But sometimes, in her bid to identify with a particular client, she would blatantly invite closer scrutiny. I was especially surprised when said to an adolescent girl who sat admiring her new visage as a buxom, bathing Aphrodite: “See dear? Now you won’t have to buy them, like I did.” When I asked her about this, Marty attributed the problem to letting her guard down. She told me, “I lost my focus on my job, on the task at hand. I lost concentration. I have to stay concentrated. It’s like a performance that can never be quit.” This statement is true, indeed. And I would suspect that the longer she maintains her performance, the more natural the “act” will become. However, the manner by which a person speaks reveals much about his or her private experiences. This is known as the “indexical” nature of language, pertaining to how “a person’s biography and social movements lead them to speak in a certain way” (Graddol and Swan 1989:140). For Marty, this means that there is always a danger that her language will betray her.

At times, Marty seems to have won in her struggle to be accepted socially as female. For her, the problem is not one of ability to pass, but rather a refusal to go all the way. Time after time, she lands new employment and rapidly starts her climb into
management. And then, something happens. People get suspicious, or find out the truth, and within a few weeks, or two months at most, she is again unemployed. Though Bem has suggested "the androgynous individual will someday come to define a new a more human standard of psychological health" (1975:643), Marty's experiences show that the penalties of androgyny are still severe.

It is a simple fact that androgynous persons exist in the world. In culture after culture, there have been documented cases of gender inverters, converters, and confounders. It is also a fact that in Western culture, there is no acceptable identity for those who are socially "trapped" in the middle. Desirous of a loving home and a respected role in society, they often have no choice but to don the mantles handed them: Berdache, Hijra, Travestis, Freak. In America, the current vernacular maintains that if they work hard enough, pray hard enough, and pay hard enough, they will eventually pass from male to female, or female to male. Science has set up a series of steps, a rite-of-passage whereby the sigma can be lifted and even reversed. But, as this study suggests, for some, passing is not the answer. Gender switching, like style-shifting, means a boundary is crossed, a limit transcended. For some, this may be an apt metaphor. But for others, it is not.

As a self-professed transsexual, Marty is unique in that she does not mind being called androgynous. Anne Bolin's observation that the majority of transsexuals are antagonistic towards androgyny, calling it "the antithesis of what transition was about," meets with exception here (1988:144). While Marty strives to be recognized and treated as a natural female, she knows that she will never truly become one, and she is content with that. That is not to say that she will not one day go through with the operation. But, in a Jungian sort of way, she will never entirely forgo her masculine side nor seek to deny it. For Marty, transsexualism is not a temporary state of being until she can pass from male to female. Rather, it is the closest label she has yet found to define her situa-
tion, and she has embraced it, as Jason Cromwell (1995:288) suggests, in order to “dis-
empower the stigma” and take pride in the unique and talented person that she has
become.

Conclusion

The concept of style switching emphasizes the differences between males and
females in society. It validates the notion that we are all sex-typed, channeled into
behaving in the way appropriate to our sex. The concept of switching also reveals the
Western bias, prevalent even among scholars, of a disdain for the middle ground and a
trend to only recognize as legitimate that which is at one or the other pole of a binary.
The concept of code or style shifting, however, places the linguistic emphasis on this
illusive middle ground and illustrates that, for some people, rather than tacking back
and forth from one gender-typic style to another, the more appropriate conception of
their gender affiliation or identity is in the middle, i.e. androgyny, and that rather than a
schizophrenic switch from one personality to another, these individuals shift balance, so
to speak, as circumstances require or permit. Like Marty’s dice, they are a locus of unity
by which the gender polemic becomes dialectic and the notion of gender “opposition” is
brought into question.
CHAPTER THREE

"I Am Woman":
The Narrative of a Transsexual in Prison

"A strange boy is weaving a course of grace and havoc…"

Joni Mitchell (1997:162)

This chapter will relate and evaluate a narrative, as related to me by Marty Gomez, a 28 year old preoperative transsexual living in Las Vegas, Nevada. The transcription is from an interview that occurred in October of 1995. I had joined Marty and one other, a college student who was renting a room from Marty at the time, and we were the decorating cup cakes that Marty had made earlier that afternoon.

The story involves an occasion when Marty, while living in a juvenile detention center in southern California, tried to remove her penis. I have chosen this episode not for its graphic subject matter, though it cannot be denied that the story is "sensational," but because it may be seen to parallel the narrative structure as defined first by William Labov, during his study with gang members of Harlem, and elaborated on by Renato Rosaldo and his observations among the Ilongot. This paper will explore Marty's narrative in the light of Labov and Rosaldo's mode of analysis.

In transcribing it, I have punctuated according to her vocalizations—a question mark indicates a rise in tone at the end of a sentence and italics indicate her own points of emphasis. Marty had a habit throughout this particular interview to articulate a series
of "da"s, which I interpret as "so on and so forth" but have left in the transcription intact in order to best express her personality. Due to the graphic nature of the narrative, I have included it as Appendix A rather than include it within this chapter.

The introduction of Marty's narrative is terse and eloquent, explaining only necessary details. This exposition may, in the terms of linguist William Labov (1972:364) be seen as orientation, a summary of preceding events integral to proper understanding of the events that follow, and an introduction to the setting. The orientation indicates setting—where it was happening (an institution in California) and when (Marty was a minor at the time). This introduction also includes an abstract or summary, which tells us exactly what this narrative is about—her attempt at self emasculation—but lacks any foreshadow of the climax of the tale—the results of that attempt.

Marty introduces the afternoon's rape not to blame an individual or "the system," but to establish his emotional state of mind when under the influence of the second "whacko" she is to encounter that day. This episode, then, provides a complicating action to the narrative, establishing a situation later where Marty was confronted by her roommate and conned into believing that the only possible resolution to her dilemma was the removal of the true problem, her own penis and testicles.

The next complicating action continues with the manufacture of the instrument. To explain the scenario while increasing tension, Marty employs the narrative devices Rosaldo has called "repetition, inversion, and delayed information."

It is clear at the outset that Marty tends to repeat key words, rather than whole phrases. She does this for emphasis, such as when she repeats "very" to describe how "very, very dysfunctional" her roommate was. Later, she repeats the words "knife," "blade," and "razor," prior to the operation, in order to convey the intense emotions involved, the urgency of her need and the sacrifice she was about to make. She repeats the phrase "at the edge of the toilet" to stress her physical orientation, and then repeats
the word “edge” again as she describes where her roommate was preparing to cut her. I find her emphasis on this word to be interesting. As she was sitting on the edge of the toilet, she was also “right at the edge, right of the base” of the proverbial “crossover,” about to flush and dispose of her offending manhood.

There is inversion to the plot as Marty fluctuates between being willing to do it and then wavering. She begins to have doubts, considering the blood and pain. Tension builds as she changes her mind, to again have her roommate press her to continue on. Finally, the climax or turning point of the tale: the roommate strikes the first cut. Marty repeats the words “feel” and “rip” to convey the sound and the sensation. Then, there is a role inversion when Marty herself takes the blade and makes two more cuts. The episode closes with the repetition of the imperative, “You have to do it again, you have to do it again,” and then echoes of the words “blood” and “bleeding” as she “slipped out” and started to convulse.

When Marty arrived at the hospital, the bleeding continued and more blood was transfused into her system. She tells of laying in a pool of her own blood for hours, and I find it interesting that she focuses more on the blood than the pain, or the fear of dying. It is at this point at the narrative that Marty told me of the signs and photos that she had taped to her body. This part might be considered what Labov terms a “focus of evaluation.” The listener must abide with Marty for a while, reflect on the events as she did, caught in that moment of having performed an action and waiting to find out the results. Marty describes the horror of sitting for hours in her own pool of blood, closer to her goal than she had ever been before, praying that surgeons could grant what psychologists could not.

This is the message of the statements she had attached to her body. The declaration “I am a woman” was intended to suggest the bald imperative, “make me a woman.” But the physicians did not consider this as a valid option. Marty was operating within a
social paradigm where if she could remove her manhood, the institution would be forced to concede to her declaration of identity and make her a woman. Unfortunately, the hospital responded with an option that she had not considered: complete removal of the organ would result in deformation, not re-formation. Her option was not to be male or female, but to be male or neuter.

The narrative is resolved when Marty’s mother decides on reconstructive micro-surgery, but her tale does not end there. For a proper cap, she calls on humor, and like a master storyteller, she relieved the intensity of the tragedy with humor. Instead of leaving her audience depressed and feeling sorry for her, she concludes by manipulating us to laugh, as she laughs at herself regarding her absurd method of masturbation. This coda deftly wraps up the plot while reaffirming her discomfort with her penis, an object so foreign to her that she did not even know the “normal” way to masturbate. However, I perceive a different interpretation. After years of working with cross-dressers, Ester Newton noted that professional cross-dressers employ “a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms” (109). Under this light, Marty’s coda might be a psychological defense mechanism by which what is actually being lamented is instead ridiculed. After all, while she may be comfortable with her new feminine identity, her “particular situation” has not been resolved—at least not as far as society is concerned.

At the same time, there is a suggestion of reconciliation. Marty emerges from the tale as she entered in, a fully functional male who identified himself as a female and was sexually attracted to other men. After all she had been through, all she seems to have gained from it was in learning how best to masturbate. It was not until a follow up interview that I learned that this experience has had a profound affect on Marty’s sense of identity. Prior to this event, Marty referred to herself using at least three different names, depending on audience and circumstance. It was after this experience that she
settled on the name "Marty," and she never again self identified as "Male" under any circumstance.

Marty's narrative follows classic narrative structure as elucidated by Rosaldo and Labov, and the effect of the coda coincides with Labov's and Newton's observation of the performance strategies of other stigmatized individuals. If the story does its job, it will be the listener who is transformed, who understands what he or she might not otherwise be able to fathom. In laughing with Marty, the listener indicates that he or she has comprehended the situation. The laughter thus serves not only to relieve the tension of the harrowing story but to assure the narrator that the audience has receive her intended message and can better empathize with her awkward position within society.

Transsexuals and Hijras: Some Cross-Cultural Considerations

After reading the preceding narrative, one might ask, "Why did Marty try to emasculate herself?" As discussed previously, the conclusion or coda of the narrative left this question unanswered. The vernacular myth of transsexuality, that a transsexual is a person trapped in the body of the opposite sex, might suggest that her innate gender affiliation drove her to such extreme measures. I do not mean to entirely negate this theory, as Marty herself claims to be driven by a desire to undergo surgical sex reassignment so that she can "make love like a woman." It is also clear, however, that her attempt at emasculating came about through social and cultural pressures and not through some "dysphoric" biological craving. Recall that she never would have committed this act if not for the coaching and encouragement of her "whacked-out" roommate.

I turn for comparative example to the hijras of India. According to anthropologist Serena Nanda, hijras define themselves as either incomplete men or "neither men nor women" (1986:380). Emasculinization is required of one to become a hijra, and Nanda has found a spectrum of possible attitudes among them as to whether or not they
should undergo the surgery (1986:404). Some feel that the conversion will make them as real women. Some attribute a spiritual element to the transformation, believing it to increase their luck and social status. Some were indifferent, having the attitude that their penis was "broken" anyway (as it would not be used for reproduction) "so why not get rid of the useless thing" (1996:404).

However, Nanda also points towards social pressures to conform. In order to make a living, hijras perform ceremonial rituals at temple festivals, weddings, and other occasions. In order to be paid for their time and efforts, they may be required to prove that they are indeed legitimate or "true" hijras: "Emasculation distinguishes real hijras from the fakes, and if a challenge reveals that a performer's genitals have not been removed, the whole group will be reviled and driven away without payment as impostors" (1990:11).

Nanda (1996:384) sees the hijra emasculation process as "a classic rite of passage" which hijras call nirvan, with a preparatory state where the goddess Bahuchara Mata is "asked for permission to perform the operation, a sign that is conveyed by various omens." Once the goddess gives her consent, the penis and testicles are removed using "two diagonal cuts with a sharp knife." The genitals are buried under a tree, and the hijra enters into a liminal stage where the initiate "is subject to man of the same restrictions as a woman after childbirth." The hijra is reintegrated into the community "dressed as a bride, signifying the active sexual potential in the marriage relationship." The hijra emerges as though she had been reborn, now a symbol of divinity and "generativity" (1990:23) with strong and valuable powers.

The Hindu culture allows the hijras a place in Indian society. Nanda states that "It is this characteristically Indian ability to tolerate, even embrace, contradictions and variation at the social, cultural, and personality levels that provides the context in which the hijras cannot only be accommodated, but even granted a measure of power"
In Western culture there is limited to no tolerance for the contradictions that our transsexuals force us to face. The rite of passage here is a virtual transformation from one gender to the other through the use of hormones, performance, and surgery (Bolin 1988). There is no tolerance for those in the middle or "gender dysphoric." Through the sex change operation, the sexual body is brought in alignment with the gender of mind and thus the dysphoria resolved. Transsexuality then is not an identity in its own right but the process whereby gender dysphoria is treated and reconciliation—sex with gender, body to mind—occurs.

Janice Raymond has been fiercely critical of this philosophy. She writes, although popular literature on transsexualism implies that Nature had made mistakes with transsexuals, it is really society that has made the mistake by producing conditions that create the transsexual body/mind split. While intersexed people are born with chromosomal or hormonal anomalies, which can be linked up with certain biological malfunctions, transsexualism is not of this order. The language of "Nature makes mistakes" only serves to confuse and distort the issue, taking the focus off the social system, which is actively oppressive. It succeeds in blaming an amorphous "Nature" that is made to seem oppressive and is conveniently amenable to direct control/manipulation by the instrument of hormones and surgery. (1979:115)

She raises many interesting points in her book, The Transsexual Empire (1979). She points out that male-to-female transsexuals are not females and can never become "women." Raymond feels that male-to-female transsexuals impose on the territory of woman, appropriating and distorting femininity and femaleness for their own ends. She writes, "[b]ecause transsexuals have lost their physical 'members' does not mean that they have lost their ability to penetrate women—women's minds, women's space, women's sexuality" (104).

The issues raised by Raymond and other feminists suggest that transsexuals are "trapped," but not by their bodies. As with the hijras, male-to-female transsexuals are
not-men and not-women, and they will continue to be thus despite the currently myth of “crossing.” Whereas in India, transgendered persons have an option to become a third category that embraces both masculinity and femininity, transsexuals in the United States have no such category or identity to assume, and are thus left with a stigma of being forever unnatural and sick.

Why did Marty attempt to emasculate herself in prison? Was it truly the result of “being trapped in the wrong body”? Such a notion implies that there is a “right” body to be transformed into. By lumping all transsexuals into the category of gender dysphoria is a convenient oversimplification by perpetrated by what Foucault might call a deployment of sex. “a technology of power and knowledge which it had itself invented” (1990 [1978]: 123; see also Raymond 1979). As Hausman suggests,

Doctors, with ever increasing ability to intervene in and on the human body, to enact what are construed as miracles of the flesh, play out fantasies of the normal and the idea. The operative discursive opposition within which the cosmetic surgery “revolution” finds itself has more to do with the categories “normal” and “abnormal”—and the physicians’ increasing authority to distinguish an shift those distinctions—than with an opposition between the categories “men” and “women.” (65)

With her actions, Marty forced the medical industry to address her needs. She though that she was forcing the issue, the surgeons would have to grant her wish and perform the surgery. She was determined to undergo the rite-of-passage that she had been learning of, the process by which a man might become as a woman, or a woman as a man. She has stated repeatedly that much of this desire to transform has arisen out of her desire to be like a woman, to make love like a woman. But the societal pressures that are brought to bear cannot be ignored. While there may be a psychic need on the part of transsexuals to become the gender to which they feel affiliated, I agree with Hausman and Raymond that the social pressures to conform are every bit as strong as the psychological issues.
CHAPTER FOUR

Indexing Androgy; The Transgendered Phenomenon
and its Challenge to Ethnology

Maintaining an analytic distinction between sex and gender does not relegate "sex" to the realm of scientific fact, but allows the critical thinker to make trouble in that very realm.

—Bernice Hausman

Role Reversals in the Social Sciences: 

*Cherchez les Femme*

Margaret Mead, following the lead of mentor Ruth Benedict, set out to study the way “three primitive societies have grouped their social attitudes towards temperament about the various obvious facts of sex difference” (1935:x). Mead chose for her analysis three diverse Melanesian tribes: “the gentle mountain-dwelling Arapesh, the fierce cannibalistic Mundugumor, and the graceful head-hunters of Tchambuli” (1935.ix). The aim of her research was to reconsider the relationship between sexual dimorphism and division of labor.

Mead, in the tradition of Boas and Benedict, preferred to study influence of culture in the formation of the psyche, as opposed to biology and physiology. However, she clearly recognized that the division of labor was based on the biological reality of sexual dimorphism: “[N]o culture has failed to seize upon the conspicuous facts of age and sex in some way” (Mead xi). Mead used her cross-cultural comparisons to show
"that many, if not all, of the personality traits which we have called masculine or fe­m­nine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing, the manners, and the form of head­dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex" (1945:280). Our gender identities, in other words, become as natural to us as language, and are as seemingly instinctual.

Mead found that not all societies are trapped by the rigid polarization of the polemic world view; nor are they so brutal with their misfits. In Sex and Temperament, she concluded her analysis with a chapter devoted to "the deviant." Here, Mead is urgent in her assertion that certain deviant persons whom have long been considered "psychotic" or even "psychopathic" are not the result of "accident or to disease, but to a fundamental discrepancy between his innate disposition and his society's standards" (292).

Mead anticipated Goffman (1963) when she came to the defense of social misfits, those who have been written of as neurotic by both science and society. As she sees it, society compounds the problems through mandating gender dimorphism:

[A]ny society that specializes its personality types by sex, which insists that any trait—love for children, interest in art, bravery in the face of danger, garrulity, lack of interest in personal relations, passiveness in sex-relations; there are hundreds of traits of very different kinds that have been so specialized—is inalienably bound up with sex, paves the way for a kind of maladjustment of a worse order. (293–294)

Such maladjustment—generally termed "psychosis"—is only possible because, as Carl Jung noted, "our Western mind, lacking all culture in this respect, has never yet devised a concept, nor even a name, for the union of opposites through the middle path" (1982 [1994] 307–308). How can you talk about something you have no word for? How can you discuss something that you cannot see?
One Body, Two Spirits

Mead noted that some cultures, while maintaining the same distinct male/female gender associations as traditional Westerners, would allow a particular individual to "cross" to the other gender. Mead discussed the coming of age of a young American Indian youth. As a boy, this person "showed such marked feminine physical traits that a group of women had once captured him and undressed him to discover whether he was really a boy at all (1935:295). As he matured, the boy gradually began to associate more with feminine tasks and preferred to wear women's underwear. At dances, he would start the evening associating with the men, but as the evening progresses "he would begin to move closer and closer to the women, as he did so putting on one piece of jewelry after another. Finally a shawl would appear, and at the end of the evening he would be dressed as a berdache, a transvestite." (1935:295).

Mead was not the first anthropologist to mention the berdache. Matilda Coxe Stevenson, Elsie Clews Parsons, Ruth Underhill, and Ruth Landes each associated on a personal level with berdache during their fieldwork, and each wrote clearly on the topic. In her famous Patterns of Culture, published one year prior to Sex and Temperament, Ruth Benedict had described the berdache as men who "took the dress and the occupations of women" (1934:263), but she perceived discomfort among Native Americans about the berdache in their midst:

The berdaches were never regarded as of first-rate supernatural power, as similar men-women were in Siberia, but rather as leader in women's occupations, good healers in certain disease, or, among certain tribes, as the genial organizers of social affairs. They were usually, in spite of the manner in which they were accepted, regarded with a certain embarrassment. It was thought slightly ridiculous to address as 'she' a person who was known to be a man and who, as in Zuni, would be buried on the men's side of the cemetery. But they were socially placed. (1935:263)

Mead echoes Benedict's assessment: "The institution of the berdache in turn served as a
warning to every father; the fear that the son might become a berdache informed the parental efforts with an extra desperation, and the very pressure which helped to drive a boy to that choice was redoubled" (1935:xii).

However, this relegation of the berdache to low status has not been supported by all ethnographers. Will Roscoe is among those who have found many Native American tribes celebrated their berdache. "They were integral, productive, and valued members of their communities" (1991:4). Matilda Coxe Stevenson (1904) introduced one of the most "noted and prominent" members of the Zuni tribe, a lhama named We‘Wha. Frank Hamilton Cushing described We‘Wha as “farmer, weaver, potter, housekeeper” (qtd. in Roscoe 1991:127). He was also an authority on tribal history and played an active ceremonial role. We‘Wha’s dress, speech, manner, and behavior were all as a woman, and, according to Roscoe, at was years before Stevenson realized that We‘Wha was a male, even though she had long recognized We‘Wha as being the strongest and tallest person in Zuni (Roscoe, 1988:55).

This is not to say that Benedict’s pessimistic assessment of discomfort among Native Americans as regards berdache is entirely unfounded. Any person will have allies and enemies, and this is certainly to be expected of the berdache, no matter what ceremonial role they may fill. One can easily imagine profound gender-based jealousies. What is one to make of the sissy who out-hunts a hunter? What is a woman to think of a man who is a better potter or weaver than she? The Zuni attributed We‘Wha’s premature death to witchcraft, suggesting that not all were amenable towards their lhama.

Since Kroeber’s 1940 assertion that “the time is ready for a synthetic work on this subject,” several anthropologists have given serious consideration to the phenomenon called berdache. Most cited is Walter Williams’ The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture (1986). Though controversial, Williams produced the first ethnography devoted to transgendered persons in various Native American tribes. He found the “berdache” to be nearly ubiquitous to Native American cultures:

Male and female berdaches (that is, women who assumed male roles as warriors and chiefs or engaged in male work or occupations) have been
documented in over 130 North American tribes, in every region of the continent, among every type of native culture, from the small bands of hunters in Alaska to the populous, hierarchical city-states of Florida. Among the Pueblo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico, male berdaches have been recorded at Acoma, Hopi, Isleta, Laguna, Santa Ana, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, San Juan, Tesuque, and Zuni. In the various languages spoken in these pueblos they were called kokwimu ([Keres], hova (Hopi), ihunide (Tiwa), kwidó (Tewa) and lhamanó (Zuni). (5)

While The Spirit and the Flesh was well received by Anthropologists and many Native Americans, many have been critical of Williams's study. Annette Jaimes voices a loud and legitimate complaint about the use of the term berdache by anthropologists: "'Berdache' is an utterly inappropriate term by which to describe American Indian homosexuality insofar as it refers to the practice of certain Arab male populations of keeping slave boys for sexual purposes" (1992:343). She accuses Williams of appropriating and distorting indigenous traditions for the purpose of gay advocacy (1992:333; see also Medicine 1983). It is somewhat ironic that Harry Hay, often called the founder of the modern gay movement (see Timmons 1990), has a similar criticism. Hay accuses Williams of totalizing: "Dr. Williams wants to call every Gay Indian he meets... either a 'Berdache' or by the particular name of this Ceremonial function sacred to a given tribe" (1996:280).

Williams was well aware of the spurious origins of the term Berdache. He himself has traced the etymology:

It [berdache] is not a term from an Indian language, but was used by European explorers in North America. The word originally came from the Persian bardaj, and via the Arabs spread to the Italian language as bardasso and to Spanish as gardaxa by the beginning of the sixteenth century. About the same time the word appeared in French as bardache. (9)

Even while knowing that the term was not etymologically a good fit, Williams stayed with anthropological tradition and utilized the experience-distant, etic concept of "berdache." This is unfortunate, for of all the criticisms leveled against Williams, the
most glaring is the application of a word with such nefarious colonial overtones. However, it is a word that many are reluctant to dismiss. Sue-Ellen Jacobs admits:

I, for one, give up the use of the word “berdache” with great reluctance...for it has been an important symbol of potential liberation from gender identity construction, homophobia, and sexuality containment for some lesbian/gay/two-spirit First nations/Native American Indian activists as well as for myself and other non-Natives” (1997:36).

To trash Williams ethnography, then, is to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. While Williams may have personalized and totalized a very complex cultural phenomenon, many Native Americans themselves have turned to his book for historical grounding and guidance. Self-identified winkte Doyle V. Robertson wrote that Williams’ book “offered validation of many of my inner feelings and a vehicle for connecting with the traditions of sexual acceptance in my Native cultural history” (1997:231).

Of late, Native Americans from various tribes have asked that the term “berdache” be dropped in favor of the more accurate label, “two-spirit.” This term emphasizes a sacred spiritual role to fill in society. For instance, We’Wah’s position within Zuni was secured by Zuni religion. The first Lhamana was considered primal, born of the first generation of Zuni. He/she was the result of an incestuous rape, born along with the nine Koyemshi clowns. Cushing explains the significance of this: “From the mingling of too much seed in one kind comes the two-fold one-kind, ‘hłamon, being man and woman combined” (qtd. in Roscoe, Man-Woman 151).

Wesley Thomas, a Navajo who identifies as a Navajo two-spirit, related to me a Navajo origin myth where two-spirit like beings, the Changing Twins, play a very important role. The tale is also told in Williams:

The Navajo origin tale is told as a story of five worlds. The first people were First Man and First Woman, who were created equally and at the same time. The first two world that they lived in were bleak and unhappy, so they escaped to the third world. In the third world lived two
twins. Turquoise Boy and White Shell Girl [the changing twins], who were the first [two-spirits]...In the third world. First Man and First Woman began farming, with the help of the changing twins. One of the twins noticed some clay and, holding it in the palm of his/her hand, shaped it into the first pottery bowl. The he/she formed a plate, a water dipper, and a pipe. The second twin observed some reeds and began to weave them, making the first basket. Together they shaped axes and grinding stones from rocks, and hoes form bone. All these new inventions made the people very happy.

According to Thomas, this origin myth and the personages of the "Changing Twins" has enabled the Navajo to perceive five categories of gender. He describes the concept by delineating "sex linked behaviors" such as "body language, speech style, and voice pitch, clothing and adornment" and those associated aspects associated with ceremonial practices and child rearing. The first two genders are analogous to the Western conceptions of male/masculinity and female/femininity. Also comparable to Western epistemology, the Navajo perceive hermaphrodites. These persons are called nádleeh. Thomas (1997) suggests that nádleeh signified "hermaphroditic" more in the aspect of gender than sex, as they are represented in origin stories in terms of behavior, not anatomy. Still, he reserved the term nádleeh to signify one both sex- and gender-ambiguous.

Thomas further discerns between female-bodied nádleeh and male-bodied nádleeh. He prefers to refer to these people as "womanly-male" and "manly-female," but notes that some are discomforted by these labels as "they are too close to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual III-R (American Psychological Association 1989) typologies used under "gender dysphoria."" (1997:160). "Gender Dysphoria Syndrome" was perceived at its inception in the 1970s to be a mental disease whereby the primary symptom was the desire on the part of a patient to become the "opposite" sex by way of hormones and surgery. Thomas is clear that "[i]n Navaho tradition, there is no concept of gender dysphoria; rather...there is a concept of gender diversity (meaning it is recognized that there are more than two genders)” (1997:160).
Here, Thomas points towards a very important distinction between the concept of transsexual versus the concept of two spirit people. Transsexuality is a temporary and fluid identity, where two-spirit is stable and more "fixed." Transsexuality is temporary in that a transsexual is often perceived as person in transition, going from one sex to the other. A transsexual is thus a person who is undergoing a "rite of passage" from one "sex" to another. It is suggested that one day, the dysphoric individual will be reconciled with his body, and therefore the syndrome eradicated through treatment and surgery, the person no longer considered "transsexual" but now a full-fledged (social) female or a fully accepted (social) male. Two-spiritedness, in contrast, is a fixed identity. There is no rite-of-passage to undertake, no "act of becoming" to be socially accepted. It is a valid and legitimate identity in its own right, with special roles and responsibilities assigned to it.

Gender*: The Gender Continuum

As with the Navajo, gender among the Zuni was much more than a simple matter of genitalia. Instead, both men and women had a range of different gender identities that they may assume. As Roscoe describes it, one's identity as a Zuni could never be reduced to a fixed gender. The social and religious experiences of both men and women modulated across a range of gender positions and identities. Gender was, in many cases, situationally determined. If a medicine man were called to assist at childbirth, for example, he was temporarily referred to as "grandmother"—since men technically were not allowed to be present at births. Men could also identify with female roles by portraying female kachinas. Similarly, because Stevenson fulfilled male social roles, the Zunis gave her male prayer sticks to plant.

(Man-Woman 144)

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In Zuni culture, as in much of Native America, gender was elastic. Williams echoes Mead when he asserts that

Many Native Americans also understood that gender roles have to do with more than just biological sex. The standard Western view that one's own sex is always a certainty, and that one's gender identity and sex role always conform to one's morphological sex is a view that dies hard. Western thought is typified by such dichotomies of groups perceived to be mutually exclusive: male and female, black and white, right and wrong, good and evil. Clearly, the world is not so simple; such clear divisions are not always realistic. Most American Indian world views generally are much more accepting of the ambiguities of life. (1986:3)

"Gender dysphoria" is a Western concept which suggests that a person can be born or "trapped" in the body of the "opposite" sex. It is the product of a culture that mandates that males be masculine and females feminine. Ethnographer Anne Bolin attributes this intolerance of gender ambiguity to the increasing phenomenon of transsexualism:

In the Western paradigm women are people with vaginas; therefore, if a man believes himself to be a woman, he must look the part, down to the genitals...Male-to-female transsexual surgery underscores the Euro-American principles of gender that are regarded as natural and inevitable: that is, that there are only two sexes and that these are inviolable and are determined by genitalia" (1996:454).

One of the leading feminine "sex symbols" in Brazil today, Roberta Close, is quite open about her transsexuality. Conrad Kottak has included in his most recent introductory text for students of anthropology a section describing how the Brazilian populous has embraced this "incredibly feminine character...despite the fact that he—or she (speaking as the Brazilians do)—is a man posing as a woman." Kottak finds Close's celebrity curious, but concludes that it should come as no surprise in a "setting in which male-female inversion is part of the year's most popular festival." Kottak adds, "For Roberta Close and other like her, the cultural demand of ultramasculinity has yielded to
a performance of ultrafemininity. These men-women form a third gender in relation to Brazil's more polarized male-female identity scale" (188–189). With all due respect, Kottak's assessment is slightly askew. He correctly observes that, in Brazilian culture, gender is ultimately a matter of who is penetrating whom; ultimately, a man penetrates and a woman is penetrated. To the Brazilians, then, Close does not represent a third gender. In their eyes, she has crossed over to the female side; she thereby passes as female and any young man lucky enough to land her—and there are many who would love to—would survive the encounter with his masculinity intact.

Ethnographer Don Kulick shows that the concept of "passing" allows for no intermediate sex. He describes these males as "effeminized prostitutes" who enjoy anal penetration (1997:575). Kulick believes that "travistis modify their bodies not because they feel themselves to be women but because they feel themselves to be 'feminine' ... or 'like a woman'" (1997:575). I have found the same to be true of transgendered persons, including each of my transsexual consultants to date, in North America.

Alonzo, a tv-spirit friend of mine who currently resides in Nebraska, once related a dream to me in which a sage appeared before him holding two small wooden boxes which were intricately carved like mini jewelry chests. Alonzo shyly approached the sage and peeked inside the first chest. Inside he spied beautiful diamonds shining on a velvet pad. He next turned to look in the second chest, and was surprised to find multi-colored chunks of Jell-O! "Now isn't that just like me," he laughed: "Bipolar!"

While Alonzo and I could laugh at the dream, it hits on some very real and very serious social issues. For instance, when We'Wah was laid to rest, an interesting problem arose. How should she be dressed? As We'Wah fulfilled both masculine and feminine roles, to dress him as either would be inconsistent with her character. The resolution: We'Wah was buried in a dress, with man's pants underneath. In American culture, however, this issue would not be so easily resolved. Like the Brazilians, we have no real intermediary
gender alternatives and force our citizens to conform to one end of a bipolar gender ideology. Consider, for instance, the modern driver's license, where anyone who looks at this important piece of identification can tell at a glance which "sex" that person was. Now consider the situation of the bi-gendered person trying to "pass" as the other gender. No matter how well they look the part, no matter now much estrogen or silicon they have injected into their system, that stigma will always set them apart—at least until the surgery is completed.

Surgical sex reassignment is becoming an increasingly common occurrence. For many of America's transgendered individuals, it is their only real alternative. My primary consultant and friend of three years, whom I call Marty, is a preoperative transsexual. Throughout Marty's early life, she was chastised as being effeminate. Her step father would beat her, calling her a sissy of "faggot": "I would curl my hair," Marty recalls, "and the hair spray had to be perfect. He didn't like that. It was too effeminate, and it was really a problem." (see chapter two and White 1998)

After breast implants and estrogen therapy, Marty's life began to change. No longer an effeminate male, she gradually became a slightly masculine and "exotic" female—and social acceptance followed. Instead of being scorned by men, Marty is now often pursued by them. She can recall job interview where the "boss" never removed his eyes from her buxom build. Whereas finding a job had been difficult in the past, Marty was now in demand and has since secured positions as waitress and salesperson, and she is even a successful Mary Kay sales representative. Through all the success, however, there is also grave fear. What if she should be discovered? What if an employer looked closely at the license and noted that "M" where an "F" should be?

Problems such as this frequently occur. Last year, a man in the financial aid office at a major university, upon discovering Marty's situation, insisted on loudly calling her "Sir" before the entire room crowded with other students. After Marty filed
a complaint, that person was admonished by the administration; nevertheless, Marty's cover had been blown before at least a dozen people.

A second problem has not been so easily resolved. After years of paying automobile insurance at the female rate, her carrier, having noted the discrepancy on her driver's license, sent her a letter demanding that she either fix the "oversight" or remit the difference—which was several hundred dollars. Marty's first thought was to call the California Department of Motor Vehicles. She was told that as long as she had a letter from a physician that indicated that she was for all practical reasons a female, they would change her license. After securing this letter from her physician and taking it to the DMV, the policy suddenly changed. Instead of accepting the letter and making the change, the woman at the counter was outraged at Marty's misguided assumptions and refused to alter the form (see also Murray 1994:60).

Emotionally, rationally, and behaviorally, Marty acts and passes as a female. But as far as the insurance agents are concerned, there is still a penis behind the wheel, and statistics show that people with a penis are far more dangerous drivers than those with a vagina. If Marty wanted to maintain her insurance coverage, she would have to either pay the higher "male" rate or else excise her penis. She has been paying the higher rates, but she is all the more determined to undergo the change.

With these experiences in mind, it is clear that the vernacular myth that a transsexual is a person "trapped" in the body of the "opposite" sex is highly problematic. First of all, it assumes that there sex is a polemic whereby one sex may be defined in contrast to another. Second, it suggests that it is the "body" that has done the trapping, and that, through surgical and hormonal intervention, the "true" sex can be attained. Anthropologists, psychologists, and historians have repeatedly shown that if there is any "trapping" going on, it is through a socio-cultural regime that mandates sexual dimorphism allied with biological determinism. This trap is largely formed of myth, tradition.
and semantics. This makes the transsexual phenomenon, and the more common trans-gendered phenomenon, rightly the territory of the linguist and cultural anthropologist.

The Cross Over

As she has emerged into her new identity, Marty has come to appreciate and accept herself as she never could before. For the first time in her life, she considers herself attractive. As her own gender perception has come in accordance with societies, it is as if she has been born again, in a very real sense:

Living as a woman is much happier for me. Much, much happier. I do not believe that it’s because I can do certain things as a woman, but I honestly believe that when I am sitting here alone by myself, sitting in front of the fireplace, I feel content with being, living as a woman for as long as I have. It makes me really, really comfortable. I sit there and I just dream, I think about where I’ve come through this ordeal, and I think about my future and it kind of bothers me sometimes that I was born male. But I’m not altogether all that upset about it. Because I believe that I wouldn’t have learned, what I have... I’m going to learn more than many, many other people will ever have the chance to learn because of being born male and going through the crossover.

This quote illustrates how, true to the current conception of transsexuality, Marty does feel more comfortable living as a female. She seems to agree with Melinda Whiteway that a transsexual is a person who has a “conviction that they belonged to a sex that was different than their bodies demonstrated.” This does not, however, mean that all transsexual will desire to undergo the “cross-over,” as Marty calls it. I found it interesting that, though unaware of the concept of the two-spirit, Marty described herself as such: I do not think that I’ve always been a woman, I just think that I have always associated with this type of a life; I’ve always believed that I would be much happier being treated as a woman and that I would be much happier with a woman’s body. I do not believe that means that I am a woman trapped inside a man’s body. There’s a point in my life
where I used to distinctly consider myself two persons, where I would say "Well Marty, in Marty’s case..." or "In Pedro, in Pedro’s case..." I would go back and forth between the two in order to try to understand what I was doing, and I learned, or I came to understand, that they're the same person, clearly. It's just that those things are incorporated, and I've learned that the only difference between how I feel and how other people might feel is what society's teaching us about certain sex roles.

What would We’Wha have said had she been presented with the options of modern cosmetic surgery? Would s/he, too, admire his/her prosthetic endowments, proud of "her" success at finally passing? I think not. Why should he be forced to go through the pain, the work, and the danger of surgery when his culture respected him for who he was? What if Western society embraced the two-spirit as a legitimate social identity and made room in our language for that "union of opposites" that Jung called for generations ago?

Kulick believes that "The desire to be attractive for persons of the opposite gender puts pressure on individuals to attempt to approximate cultural ideals of beauty, thereby drawing them into patriarchal and heterosexual imperatives that guide aesthetic values and that frame the direction and the content of the erotic gaze" (1997:581). Accepting this as given, I cannot help but wonder how many of our own transsexuals determine to undergo a sex change operation because of their own "innate" desires and how many make the surgery their foremost goal due to social pressures. If our transgendered persons have to undergo surgery in order to feel attractive and be accepted in society, then that is a price that many are willing to pay. But this fact stands as a sorry testament for the state of American culture, that we are so caught up in the maintenance of appearances and false, teleologically-based notions of human gender that our two-spirit like people are pushed to such costly and dangerous extremes. Through comparative ethnology, we can see that some cultures, such as the Navajo and other
Native American cultures, accept their transgendered persons and allow them a space in which to explore their affiliated gender role and grow as a respected and valuable member of the community.

The transgendered challenge to ethnology, the science of cross-cultural comparisons, is to question the notion that gender dimorphism is allied with sexual dimorphism. The regime of "sex," as Foucault and Laqueur have shown, is the framework on which the regime of "gender" is constructed. In teaching the ubiquity of sexual dimorphism, we ignore the work of endocrinologist who have found that "Most sexual characteristics... emerge from bipotential precursors in the embryo and a spectrum of differentiation is possible at each level of sexual organization" (Van Wyk and Grumbach 1968:537).

The ongoing work of ethnologist and historians shows that sex is a cultural construct, a social identity every bit as much as it is a biological reality. While biological sex is a spectrum of possibilities, a mosaic of genetic influences, sex has also become a driving social force that reduces each of us into one pole of a bipolar cultural epistemology that does not accurately reflect the reality of nature. As Frank Lillie observed in 1939, "Sex is not a force that produces these [dimorphic] contrasts; it is merely a name for our total impression of the differences...(qtd. in Hausman 1995:39). Sex is perception that becomes a reality, an emic "fact" that becomes etic dogma; ultimately, it becomes a hegemonic force that dictates gender identity, primarily through the twin myths of sexual dimorphism and biological determinism.

If, being born into a tolerant society, an individual decided to undergo surgical sex reconstruction, then, assuming they had proper guidance and could afford it, so be it. However, when an individual from a gender-dimorphic culture takes great risk, at great cost, to change their bodies to fit the whims of culture, then, in my assessment, it is the culture that might be perceived as "sick" and not the individual supposedly in need of "treatment" (see Edgerton 1992 on "sick societies.") Thus it is my hope that
cultural anthropologists will use ethnology to illustrate the cross-cultural differences and similarities of the conception of gender.

As I have shown, as much of the "trap" for North American transsexuals is a product of culture rather than biology, so it follows that the teachers of cultural studies may help introduce a discussion of gender that allows for variance and allows for flexibility of roles.

To conclude, I again evoke the words of Mead (1967 [1949]):

To the extent that all the members of a sex are automatically debarred from using their talents in some field in which a little objective research would show that they are perfectly fitted to contribute, it is obviously useful to society to break such myths down. If we recognize that we need every human gift and cannot afford to neglect any gift because of artificial barriers of sex or race or class or national origin, then one of the things we must know is...[that] the assumed differences between the sexes are mere elaborations of unimportant differences (15, emphasis added).

It has been my experience that transgendered persons see the world in a different way than "normal" women and men. By considering their perspective, we can thus gain a better understanding of humanity. Let us help to create a social environment that allows transsexuals and other transgendered persons to explore the transgendered phenomenon as it exists in world history, so that they can better define themselves and establish their own language and culture by which to explore their unique identities.

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1 Mead neglected to note the individual's tribal affiliation, but earlier in the book she makes note that this phenomenon is particularly prevalent among the Plains Indians. I wonder if perhaps she is referring to the Zuni We'Wha, as she was probably aware of Stephenson's work.
Appendix A

Transcription of interview held in Marty's home on October 21, 1995.

Marty: They had one dorm that one stayed in for a little while as they placed you in the appropriate dormitory within that institution. I was there. And I was there for so long, I was just going crazy. This dorm was a lot more restrictive than all the other ones. I wasn't used to being locked up all the time, 'cause in all the other ones I had been in, I was free; I was very active in sports, and the choir, and all that stuff. So, it just didn't, didn't click, you know, that I had to stay in that room. That was the procedure. During that time I was, I was "housed," in the same cell, with a person who was twenty-two (I was seventeen), who was supposedly a transsexual as well. This person was very, very bad. This person have been very, very dysfunctional. Well, I thought he was manipulating me, and telling me things that he wanted me to believe, things that I didn't know about this— particular thing that I am going through, and, um, so I believed him a lot, because he was twenty-two, and I thought he was getting along okay with his thoughts about it and everything, and it just didn't, um, he just didn't, I didn't, I didn't have any evidence otherwise, so I believed most of what he said. So he told me about a person who, um, who supposedly attempted to decap—, or, castrate themselves and that the state had to pay for it.
Todd: The state had to pay for it?

Marty: Yeah, since he was in the institution. They had to finish the operation and pay for it. Okay, supposedly that was what was the case. He wasn't all that wrong—it happened. The only reason it happened was because this person was an adult, I later found out. Anyway, after enough coercion, this person told me, "This is what you're gonna do. Come on, come on, you've got to do it, this is what you gotta do, you gotta do it."

Well I said, "I don't know if I could take that kind of pain, da-da-da, da-da-da, I'll die, whatever, or I'll bleed to death. Eventually, it happened; but before it happened, that very same day, the cook for my particular cottage, which is an outside agency that is put in there, tried raping me, by, by locking me in a closet. And in the kitchen, I was a KP person. And he really hurt me, I mean he punched me in the face, this guy just went wacko. Okay, he all the sudden just went wacko. And I immediately, you know, they found out because they heard noises and da-da-da-da. Right? And I was okay, because the guy, you know, in prison, and everything and all that stuff. But his happened, and then they go and put me in this room with this crazy motherfucker who is telling me, "okay this is what you need to do, you need to cut it off.

Well, I wanted it that bad, so I thought. Right? Which I did. I just didn't want to go through that way—of course that's not how you do it. But, uh, he took one of the little blue razors that you use to shave, okay? And we finagled it, da-da-da-da, and we took, uh, a burner that they made out of, um, shoe polish? They light it on fire and we took this, this knife that we had taken from the kitchen, and we just got it real hot and then just split down the back, the whole, the handle part? Of the razor?
We had already taken the blade out. Okay, and then we took that, and we buried it in there like that, while it was hot? And melted? And prepared, and created a knife, basically is what we created.

Todd: okay.

Marty: It was a razor, at the tip. So we put the razor in the end of the handle the way it was before, after we took it out and exposed only the blade. Well, that was supposed to be the utensil. Well, later on that evening, we said, how are we gonna do it, da-da-da-da, and we sat there, and we, (this is crazy) we sat there, and this is what I was supposed to do, I was supposed to sit at the edge of the toilet, sit at the edge of the toilet, and pull myself up as far as I could, and then I had the knife here and I could not do it.

And I said, you have to start it, you have to start it and then I’ll finish, I’ll finish. But the goal was to totally remove it, okay, this is how stupid his idea was. (It just wouldn’t have worked that way, okay I hope you all know that.) [Laughs]

Okay, well, he told me to. Now I had already been involved in some kind of cult type thing, and I was trying to learn a type of meditation where you focus on one thing and you are not supposed to feel anything that is going on around you, in regards to what they do to you. Well, anyways, so he said “Okay, Fine, I’ll do it,” right? “So just pull yourself out,” so I pulled myself out as far as I could go, okay. He went down right at the edge, right at the base, and he just took (I used to shave, so it was off), and he just struck it, pfuh! And he struck it, and I didn’t feel this, I really did not feel this. I was focusing on that, I didn’t see it. I felt, I felt it rip. I felt it, I heard, I heard, you know how when something happens to your body, you seem to hear it like ten times
louder, or something? Or when you’re chewing on chips, it’s like all you hear is this echoing really bad, that’s what it felt like, it was just rip, right. And then he, um, he said, “Here, now you take it.” Okay, and he left his prints all on it and everything and he gave it to me and then, and I did it one more time, and he said, “You have to do it again, you have to do it again,” And I did it one more time and, uh, eventually, what happened is I lost my train of thought, I slipped out and I went into convulsions. And um, from shock. And um, the blood was just everywhere. It was just all over the place, it was just not a pretty thing, I remember my eyes getting full of blood because it squirted in my face, but I was on the floor and not saying anything just in severe pain but moving and holding myself.

And um then they called the ambulance and they rushed me to the hospital, and after eight hours, after eight hours a specialist arrived with my mother; it took eight hours for my mother from the minute they called her way down in California to get to that institution. That’s exactly how long it took her every time she visited me. And once it hit eight hours I knew that they were waiting on my mom, I knew that that’s what they were waiting for. When she got there, they saw, they had me on a thing in a pool of blood, they had some thing going through here and feeding me blood, and it was just giving me a transfusion and giving me blood to try to replace it. By this time a nurse had already wrapped it and tried to stop most of the bleeding, but it didn’t stop, of course. I was lying in this thing and the way they had it was like a pool of blood all this was blood. Okay, I could see the blood like that. And um, the more they put in the more it bled. So, I’m, they give me something, I’m really dizzy da da da da, and I had these things taped to my body, these things were um
they were pieces of paper that said "I am a woman," like that, on both my legs and my arms and then I had two pictures of a man that I thought I was in love with—and I am in love with him, actually, and I have been for years but, and I've seen him since. But, um, she told 'em to fix it, and apparently, they were having a problem because as long with "I am a woman," I said "Do not change, do no fix me," you know, "I want to be a woman." But they were supposed to—they apparently were going to totally remove it. That was their goal. But it wasn't going to make me a woman, it was going to make me deformed. Okay? Or, if my mother consented they would go ahead, because I was seventeen, they would go ahead and attempt micro-surgery. Well, they attempted micro-surgery, so you know what my Mom said. But um, so, that's when that happened.

Todd: They attempted micro-surgery meaning...

Marty: Oh, they it, they did it.

Todd: They repaired the damage that you did?

Marty: Um hm. Within three months I was forced by the doctor, in front of him, to ejaculate, to bring myself to ejaculation.

Interlocutor: You didn't have any problem with this?

Marty: He was good looking, I'm sorry! [Laughs]. He was, he was good lookin. He was! He was great! I was like, O-Kay! 'Cause he needed to see what was happening, he needed to see whether I was becoming fully erect, if was experiencing pain because of the stitches, and uh the knots underneath, what is going to happen, da-da-da-da. And, uh, first of all, he though I did it very weird, anyway, the way I masturbated. At that point, I hadn't learned to stroke this way. I was twirling it, and slapping it around, it was crazy.

All: [laughs]
Informed Consent

I, C. Todd White, am engaging in and request your assistance in researching my thesis topic, from which I plan to achieve a Masters Degree in Anthropology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

My research involves the existence of alternative gender categories beyond traditional male/female roles or identities. Believing there to be gender-intermediaries in all cultures and societies, I wish to explore and expound on the life experiences of transgendered people in American culture, both on a local (Las Vegas) and national level. Ultimately, it is my hope that your participation in this project will link you to a growing history of gender in the world.

My method, in anthropological terms, is known as participant observation. My primary tool is the interview, but that does not mean that I wish to limit our acquaintance to what's heard by the recorder. I have known many of my primary consultants for years, and I try to be a supportive, encouraging, and helpful when I can. I regret that I cannot offer you money for your time; my research is not funded enough to allow for that. I can assure you that I will do all I can to represent your opinion and convey your experiences to the best of my ability and try to attain as large an audience as I can.

I promise to protect your anonymity. Your real name will never be used unless you so request, and if your name is mentioned accidentally during our interview, it will be deleted from the tape. The tapes and transcriptions will be donated to the ONE.
Institute Gay and Lesbian Archives if you so desire, and destroyed after three years if you do not wish to become a part of that collection, housed on campus of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

To confirm that I am who I claim, or to inquire as to the methods or procedures appropriate in the ethnographic situation, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, (702) 895-1357, for information regarding the rights of research participants. You may also contact my advisors, professor Gary Palmer at (702) 895-3379 or William Jankowiak, (702) 895-3610. You may also contact me at home: (702) 436-6850.

Thank you for your time and your candid replies to my questions. Please do not hesitate to advise if I ask a question you'd rather not answer or if you would rather not discuss a certain topic. I will do my best to protect your privacy and anonymity.

Sincerely,
C. Todd White, MA

_Informed Consent, part 2._

To be read out loud and recorded on tape at the beginning of interview session.

I,  (name or pseudonym), have read the Informed Consent page as given to me by Todd White. I hereby give permission to Mr. White to publish the information obtained in this interview as he finds appropriate, and I am aware that I may not be paid or otherwise compensated for my participation in this study.
Permission to use real (legal) name in this research.

I, ________________________________, hereby give permission for C. Todd White to identify myself by my legal name, as written above. I have also read and agree to the conditions in the Informed Consent page, of which Mr. White has provided me a copy.

______________________________
Signature                      Date
Questions for Transsexual Interviews

1. What name would you like for me to use when referring to you?

2. What would you like to tell me about your family life and childhood in general?
   2a. Did your parents ever divorce or separate during your childhood?
   2b. If so, what age were you at the time?
   2c. Did you reside with your mother or father after the separation?
   2d. Were you ever adopted?
   2e. Who in your family is supportive of your transsexuality?
   2f. Who in your family is least supportive of your transsexuality?

3. Do you consider yourself to be gay?
   3a. If so, when did you first “come out”?
   3b. At what age was your first experience with a man?
   3c. At what age was your first experience with a woman?
   3d. Who in your family knows about your homosexuality?

4. Do you have a spouse, partner, or lover?
   4a. How long have you been together?
   4b. If so, was the relationship monogamous?
   4c. Under what circumstances did you meet your partner?

5. Do you consider yourself to be a part of or allied with the gay community?
   5a. If so, what kind of role do you play?

6. Do you consider yourself to be a transsexual?
   6a. If so, how do you define the term?
   6b. Do you feel that you will or would have to maintain your commitment to sex-reassignment surgery in order to be properly considered a transsexual?
7. Are you, or have you been, affiliated with any church or religious organization?
   7a. If so, in what capacity and for how long?
   7b. Was the church aware of your “transsexual” affiliation?
   7c. Did you feel accepted by the religious community?
   7d. If you were not accepted by your church community, would you return to religious services if you found an accepting environment?
   7e. Do you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?

8. Are you familiar with any of the research articles, books, or the history of transsexuality?
   8a. If so, could you list the works that have influenced you the most?

9. Who are some of your favorite people in history?

10. Have you ever been a habitual user of drugs or alcohol?

11. What advice would you like to share with other people considering or going through “the crossover”?

12. What is your opinion of the word “androgyny”? Do you consider to yourself to be or having been androgynous?

13. At what age did you begin to start dressing as a girl [or boy]?

14. At what age did you decide to go through the “cross-over”?

15. Do you perceive yourself to be “trapped in the body of the opposite sex”?

16. How successful are you at “passing”?
   16a. Have there ever been times when you were exposed or revealed in public?

17. What is your occupation?
   17a. Can I inquire as to your monthly or annual income?

18. Is there anything else you would like for me to tell you about this research?

19. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

20. Are there any questions you would suggest adding to this list?
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