

## ELUSIVE INTERSECTIONS

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*“Once I began passing as a man, new questions emerged. I want to live in a way that makes me comfortable with myself, but I can't help but feel that passing as a non-transgendered man erases my past as a woman, leaving me feeling just as frustrated and feeling just as false. Finding a place where my identity and my physical self reach a common ground has been a struggle, and it is something that I am still working toward. This essay will follow that ongoing struggle to unite my politics, my identity, and my physical self into a “me” with whom I feel comfortable.”*

Two years ago, with no clear end goal in sight, I began physically altering my body with testosterone to masculinize my physical appearance. Even now, I still don't know what to call this land that I inhabit. I wouldn't necessarily call myself a “man,” though that is usually how people now perceive me. The vocabulary to describe living in a gender outside of the strict binary male and female genders is limited, relatively new, and still constantly evolving. Even when I attempt to describe my current identity, what comes out eventually contradicts itself and runs in circles. However, being referred to with male pronouns and a male name make me flinch less than going by female pronouns and a female name, so I usually put myself into the male category when forced to make a choice.

Let me explain a little about myself. I have – at various points in my life – passed as a woman, a man, and sometimes as gender ambiguous. Now, I struggle to settle into an identity, and I find myself drifting somewhere between transman and genderqueer. I resist describing myself as having had a “sex change,” as that implies a clearly defined process for changing from one

defined sex to another. I hesitate to even refer to what I have experienced as a “transition” unless I am referring to it as something that is still on-going. I started to transition in 2005 when I changed my name, started going by male pronouns, and began binding my chest flat. A few months later, I started injecting myself with testosterone. To date, I haven't undergone any surgeries – “top” or “bottom” – to alter my body.

As a transgender person, people often ask me, “What made you decide to start transitioning?” and “How did you *know*?” I am always at a loss of how to respond. Truth be told, even *I* don't know what my motivations were. I did know that I was unhappy with being female, and I had been living as fairly gender ambiguous for years. Living as a woman left me feeling like a fraud, and I imagined that there may be a better existence for me on the other side of the fence. Mostly, though, I was curious about the other possibilities. What would it be like to live as a man, to have a deeper voice, a new name, a completely flat chest, testosterone coursing through my veins? What would it be like to be an effeminate man as opposed to a masculine woman?

Over two years later, the same questions about my motivations continue to plague me. In particular, I struggled to reconcile my decision to not be a woman with my feminist beliefs. Once I began passing as a man, new questions emerged. I want to live in a way that makes me comfortable with myself, but I can't help but feel that passing as a non-transgendered man erases my past as a woman, leaving me feeling just as frustrated and feeling just as false. Finding a place where my identity and my physical self reach a common ground has been a struggle, and it is something that I am still working toward. This essay will follow that ongoing struggle to unite my politics, my identity, and my physical self into a “me” with whom I feel comfortable.

## Becoming a Transfeminist

Prior to coming out as transgender, I was an outspoken radical dyke in my small Midwestern college town of Athens, Ohio. I became active in radical queer politics at Ohio University by staging protests, organizing events, planning and participating in street theater, and generally working for change. I marched in the hotly contested “women-only” Take Back the Night march, attended performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, served as the treasurer for several years of the aptly named “Swarm of Dykes” student organization, and participated in women-centric feminist events. Yet, despite my presence on campus as an out-and-proud dyke, I was internally struggling with my identity. I had been questioning my identity for years, but I lacked the vocabulary and exposure to ideas to know what I was questioning. Until that point, I had assumed that I was unhappy with the *kind* of woman that I was presenting. I flipped through several phases, one after the other, trying to find an identity and gender presentation that fit me. I went from a clueless nerdy girl to a goth to a hippie girl to a butch/androgynous dyke. As I continued to move further along the butch spectrum, I realized that even that didn't really fit. Eventually, I came to realize that my depression wasn't about what *kind* of woman I was; my depression was coming from being a woman in the first place.

As an outspoken feminist, I didn't know how to explain to my peers or myself that I wanted to explore a male gender identity. As a young girl, I understood feminism to mean that I could do everything that boys could do. I could be strong and fiercely intellectual. I would refuse to be meek and docile, and one day, I would serve as a strong female role model for young girls. When I began considering changing my gender, I found myself confronting many of the arguments posed by the radical lesbian separatists against female-to-male transsexuals. Even though I didn't know of Janice Raymond (who in 1979 claimed transwomen “rape women's bodies” and accused transmen of being traitors and “the lost women' to other women”)

with the specific kind of separatist thinking she epitomized, the same kinds of thoughts and questions were crossing my mind when I was a young college student. If I was no longer presenting myself as a woman, would I be a “traitor” to the feminist cause? Did I want to be a man because I craved male privilege? Or, more to the point, was I just tired of appearing gender ambiguous and constantly being harassed by strangers and looking for a way out? According to radical lesbian separatists, I was supposed to take pride in my woman-specific differences, whether they were hardwired genetically or socialized culturally. However, try as I might, I could do nothing of the sort.

In searching for a way to align my identity with my politics, I happily came up with a very different set of conclusions than those of Janice Raymond. Through my exploration of gender and queer theories, I realized that my thinking about gender was still coming from a very gender binary perspective: male vs. female, men vs. women, oppressor vs. oppressed. I was overlooking all of the different ways to define “man” and “woman,” let alone all of the space outside of and/or in between those two labels. By identifying myself as transgender and moving into a male gender identity, I didn't necessarily have to feed directly into the patriarchal system that I opposed. As Patrick Califia points out, “When transgendered men and women demand their right to define gender for themselves, they are simply taking one of the first lessons of feminism to heart and asking that it be implemented” (*Sex Changes* 100). By blurring the gender boundaries, I was taking control of my own life instead of letting gender dictate who I could be. Instead of just fighting the oppression of women, I discovered a different kind of feminism: fighting *all* gender oppression. Through transfeminism and transfeminist theorists, I realized that all gender expressions should be equally valued, regardless of whether they are female, male, both, or neither. If being a woman wasn't working for me, I could take strength in choosing to change that. Leaving behind a female identity wouldn't violate all of my feminist beliefs; in fact, it would embrace them.

## Assimilating Into an FTM Transsexual Role

In considering transitioning, I knew from the beginning that there would be many limitations to how far I could go in passing as a normatively gendered man. I would always be 5 foot 4½ inches tall, have a small frame, wider hips than a typical male body, small hands and feet, and a youthful face. Surgical options, should I ever choose to pursue them, would still leave me with large scars and results that, in my opinion, came at too high a cost for a lack of quality and functionality. While I could legally change my name, I knew that my former name would still follow me around on job applications, background checks, and past accomplishments. When I returned to my childhood hometown to visit, I would not be able to escape all of the people I knew pre-transition, let alone my family. It would be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to have my legal sex on my Kansas birth certificate changed. Even if I *wanted* to do so, I would never be able to fully assimilate myself into a male gender role and appearance.

Also, as a dyke, I was not very butch. I spent my spare time knitting, and I was a classically trained clarinetist. I did not care for sports, and everything I knew about football came from marching band in high school. Cars did not interest me in the slightest. However, I knew plenty of men who had no interest in those things, either. I had no interest in upholding the ridiculous gender standards of being a “man,” just as I had no interest in upholding the standards for being a “woman.” And, as Judith Halberstam points out in *Female Masculinity*, FTM transsexuality is not just an extension of butchness by a matter of degree; gender identity and expressions of masculinity don't always follow an exact linear relationship (151). Becoming a man was not about butchness for me but something else entirely. I would need to construct my own queer version of masculinity, and as Halberstam states, “Masculinity, of course, is what we make it” (144). Consciously disregarding the pressures to fit into one gender mold or another allowed me

to construct a version of queer masculinity with which I could be comfortable.

And, truth be told, the idea of completely assimilating myself into a traditional male appearance and role scared me. I enjoyed the looks of confusion. I didn't want to look “normal” or pass as just another straight middle class white guy. I enjoyed having my radical politics assumed by my appearance, and I was afraid of losing that. I had spent years being harassed by straight white guys, and the last thing I wanted was to be assumed to be one of *them*.

By assimilation, I am referring to the erasure of all people that don't fit the white, upper-middle class, “we're just like you” mold of mainstream America. People of this mindset are concerned only with solving their own inequalities, often at the expense of others. As a queer transgender person, there are several layers of assimilation with which I must contend. First, there was the pressure to assimilate myself into the role of a “transsexual man.” After I started to pass as a man, there was a pressure to assimilate into a normatively gendered man by changing my behaviors and presentation. And now, as a queer person, there is still the pressure from the gay community to assimilate into the heterosexual mainstream. I will explore each of these later in this essay.

Assimilation should not be overlooked as a minor problem in the system. Queer author and activist Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore observes:

I can't tell you how many times I've been presented with the argument that fighting assimilation takes away from the 'real' battle, which is fighting anti-gay violence. This false dichotomy hides the fact that assimilation *is* violence, not just the violence of cultural erasure, but the violence of stepping on anyone more vulnerable than you in order to get ahead. (5)

As Bernstein points out, assimilation is a part of anti-gay violence, only it is directed at those with less power and privilege. Perpetuating this image of “we're just like you” causes the assimilationist gay movement to toss aside issues like “gender identity” in hate crime legislation because they think it will be less likely to pass, disregarding the fact that violence against transgender

people occurs at *much* higher rates than against sexual minorities. Assimilationist politics ignore those queers on the fringes – the genderqueers, the sex workers, queer people of color, the homeless queer youth – and leave them to fend for themselves. They ignore issues of race and class entirely. Inevitably, “assimilation” means “erasure” of every person that does not fit the most narrowly defined and privileged lesbian or gay man. In the end, assimilationists alienate people who could have been their allies and weaken their own movement through their exclusion. Just as transgender issues are often erased from the gay assimilationist agenda, genderqueer identities are often ignored from the transgender – or, more specifically, transsexual – agenda for legal protections and access to medical care.

For years, assimilating myself into a binary gender category had been out of the question. I had been living in a gender ambiguous state to some degree since my freshman year of high school when I cut my hair boyishly short. While working as a cashier at a retail store, customers would make rude remarks and small children would constantly ask if I was a girl or a boy. When I started college, professors of my classes would stumble awkwardly as they tried to figure out how best to refer to me. The inevitable searches at airports would always lead to confusion of who should search me – the male security guard or the female security guard. And, of course, people would stop me in the bathroom to tell me I was in the wrong one (or at least double check the door for themselves to make sure they hadn't made the mistake). At first, this questioning of my gender from others confused me. I wasn't *trying* to look gender ambiguous; I just happened to like having short hair and wearing comfortable clothes. As it started to happen more often, I started to find it incredibly amusing. Eventually, their confusion began to resonate with me. I felt more comfortable when people couldn't determine my gender or when they thought I was male. Every time that I was read as not-female in someone's head, I saw it as a personal victory. I started trying to look even more masculine. I started binding my chest as flat as possible when I was a junior in college, and I began passing more often as a boy. A few months

later, I started going by the name Elliot and asked people to use masculine pronouns when referring to me.

My main motivation in transitioning, though, was not about how other people perceived me or a desire to fit myself into a stereotypical binary male gender role; my goal was to become more comfortable with my perception of myself and to more closely align that with my physical body and presentation. While I knew the limits of physical transition, I was not determined to push myself “all the way” with surgeries and hormones. I knew that I was uncomfortable with my current self, and I wanted to explore the options of masculinizing my body. However, the medical establishment is not set up for experimenting with hormones and surgeries. In order to begin physically altering my body, I had to contend with the medical industry and the Harry Benjamin Standards of Care – the list of standard practices in the United States for working with transgender patients.

In order to get a prescription for testosterone, first I needed a psychologist's letter stating that I had been diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID), that I had been in therapy for at least three months, that I knew and understood the consequences of starting hormone treatment, and that I had no other mental illnesses that might be causing my “gender dysphoria.” In order to get that letter, I stretched truths. I began going to my university's therapist when transitioning seemed like nothing but a vague possibility, just so I could start the three-month clock for the therapy requirement. While I was not entirely sure about whether or not I wanted chest surgery, I babbled on and on about how much I hated my body. I also had to submit to psychological testing to establish that I had no *additional* mental illnesses (as, clearly, I already had one in their minds). In short, assimilation into the role of a transsexual man was required before I could take control over physically altering my body.

Even within the FTM community itself, there is an underlying pressure in transitioning: in order to *really* be transgender, a person has to change their name, dress a particular way in order to maximize the ability to pass, begin hormone therapy, then, finally, have chest reconstruction surgery. Genital

surgery, because of the extremely high cost and poor results, is typically seen as optional rather than mandatory. I was sure that I wanted to change my name, but I felt uncertain about hormones and surgery. However, in order to prove myself, I felt that I should want these things, too.

While I was making up half-truths about my identity and my relation to my physical body, I was only thinking about my personal transition goals and not considering the wider implications of my actions. I said what I thought I needed to say in order to get that letter for testosterone. I was not considering how my actions were affecting my doctor's perception of all transgender people, especially the trans students who would be following me into that office in future years. The political implications of my actions didn't even enter into my realm of thought. When no one tells the truth and only feeds the medical industry what they want to hear, it's no wonder that doctors hesitate to offer services to someone who tells a different story for fear that they are not "trans enough"!

These choices about what to disclose to doctors have real consequences. When Lou Sullivan requested a phalloplasty in 1980 at the Gender Dysphoria Program in Palo Alto, he was denied on the basis of his sexual attraction to men. He could have easily lied about his sexual orientation by claiming to be a heterosexual man in order to be approved for surgery, but he chose not to as a political statement. In explaining himself, he stated:

When I applied to your program, I knew I had an 80% chance of being rejected, but felt it was important to add my special circumstances to your list of statistics. . . . It is unfortunate that your program cannot see the merit of each individual, regardless of their sexual orientation. The general human population is made up of many sexual persuasions – it is incredible that your Program requires all transsexuals to be of one fabric. I had even considered lying to you about my sexual preference of men, as I knew it would surely keep me out of your Program, but I felt it important to be straightforward, possibly paving the way for other female-to-male with homosexual orientations – and we do exist. (Stryker 68)

Sullivan knew that telling the truth would prevent him from getting the surgery that he desired, but he did so as a conscious political decision. In doing so, he helped make it easier for queer FTMs in the future to be out

about their sexual orientations. He helped broaden the definition of what it meant to be FTM beyond a strict set of criteria that everyone has to meet.

Even now, 27 years later, assimilating into a narrow view of what "transgender" means is still an issue. In the essay "Mutilating Gender," Dean Spade chronicles his attempts at getting a psychologist's letter to allow him to have chest reconstruction surgery. Once again, he could have easily lied about wanting hormones, wanting to live as a normatively gendered man, but he made a political choice not to do so. Spade writes:

The counselor at the L.A. Free Clinic decided I wasn't transsexual during the first (and only) session. When I told him what I wanted, and how I was starting counseling because I was trying to get some letters that I could give to a surgeon so that they would alter my chest, he said, "You should just go get breast reduction." . . . To this counselor, my failure to conform to the transsexuality he was expecting required my immediate expulsion from that world of meaning at any cost. My desire couldn't be for SRS [Sex Reassignment Surgery] because I wasn't a transsexual, so it must be for cosmetic surgery, something normal people get. (324-325)

Spade goes on to discuss conversations he had with other FTMs regarding his counseling experiences. Through his conversations, he found that many could relate to his story and his identity. However, all he received from these people were more ways of lying and ways of getting around the system, which he politically refused to do. In assimilating myself into a standard "transsexual male" role, I was perpetuating this erasure of genderqueer people who wish to alter our bodies. I was feeding into the same narrow definition of FTM that I detest. Through this erasure, I was doing violence to my own body and, even more so, my identity.

Despite my later moral qualms regarding my strategies, I did get my letter diagnosing me with GID (Gender Identity Disorder) and qualifying me for hormone treatment. Over the summer of 2005, I injected my first shot of testosterone with the intentions of only taking it a shot at a time. If I was unhappy with what was happening to my body, I would quit that instant and never do another shot again. I started at a half dose in an attempt to slow down the physical changes, and I gradually increased the dosage over the following year. I began to feel present in my body in a way that I had never

felt before. Like many other transmasculine people, I became fascinated with the changes and became aware of my appearance in a way that I had never experienced. After ignoring my body for so long, I was fascinated to watch my body fat distribution shift, my muscles strengthen, my shoulders grow broader, my stomach grow a “happy trail.” My voice began to drop noticeably within months, quickly shifting the perception of me from a pre-adolescent boy to at least the teenage range. My facial shape began to shift, and facial hair slowly began to grow in. My first adolescence had left me feeling betrayed, but everything this time around was new and fascinating. Through testosterone injections, I found a way to claim ownership of my body.

After moving to a new city last year, I had to find a new doctor to prescribe me testosterone. I was asked many of the same questions that I had been asked by my therapist when I was first trying to get a GID diagnosis. This time, however, I didn't feel as inclined to lie. Perhaps it was because I was confident that, since I had already been on testosterone for the past two years, there would be no reason for her to withhold it from me now. However, when I answered that I hadn't really begun questioning my gender until I was 20 years old, my doctor seemed shocked.

“You mean you haven't *always* felt like you were a boy?” she asked.

“No,” I answered honestly.

She asked several more pointed questions and was obviously uncomfortable with my answers. In the end, she reluctantly wrote me a prescription for one more vial. If I hadn't already been on testosterone for so long, I don't know if she would have given me the prescription. Through our dialogue, though, I can only hope that her idea of what it means to be transgender was called into question.

It is only by telling the truth and telling our stories that the medical industry will come to see that all trans people cannot be fit into a one-size-fits-all mold. People like Lou Sullivan and Dean Spade sacrificing their own desires as a political statement helped pave the way for others to not have to conform to a very narrow definition of FTM. Though I have already done

damage with my past actions by lying to the medical industry, I still control how I portray myself to the medical industry in the present and future. Rather than doing what I need for personal gain, I am beginning to consider the wider implications of my actions for both myself and others.

## Assimilation Into Manhood

The pressure to assimilate myself into the role of a “transsexual man” is hardly comparable to the larger pressure to assimilate into the role of a normatively gendered man. As a transmasculine individual, I am supposed to want nothing more than the ability to pass as a man and hide my entire female past. In his essay “Look! No, Don't!” Jamison Green observes:

We are not supposed to want attention as transsexuals; we are supposed to want to fit in as 'normal' men. We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies, pretend that the vestigial female parts some of us never lose were never there. In short, in order to be a good – or successful – transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. (120)

In other words, if I was *really* transsexual, then I would do everything I could to pass as a man and erase or rewrite my entire past prior to starting to transition. And, as Green points out, the ideal situation is the unattainable: to have never been transsexual in the first place. I played the role of a transsexual man in order to gain medical access, and now I have reached a point where I *can* pass as a non-transsexual man. However, I find myself recoiling from fully doing so for several reasons.

First, it would be easy to assimilate into the mainstream based on my whiteness, my perceived maleness, my mostly normatively-gendered appearance . . . but at what cost? Assimilating myself would mean denying my first 20 years of living as a “woman,” dyke or otherwise. It means denying formative experiences, old friends, my experiences of sexism as a woman, the parts of dyke culture that have stuck with me through all of the physical changes. Making up lies about growing up as a boy or simply omitting a story

that comes to mind only make me feel as though I'm digging a deeper well of shame and secrecy within myself.

Even the act of legally changing my sex on my driver's license presented me with a moral and political dilemma. When I recently moved from one state to another, I took advantage of an ambivalent and/or inattentive Bureau of Motor Vehicles clerk. While my previous driver's license bore a very blatant "F" next to "Sex," my new license proudly reads "M." Initially, I was very excited. Now, I can get a passport that shows my legal sex as male. I can switch over the sex marker on some of my old school records if I want. Surface level interactions involving my identification such as buying beer, going out to clubs, and dealing with airport security no longer involve outing myself as transgender as long as I'm passing as male. After the initial excitement wore off, I reconsidered what I had just done: am I thwarting the system by changing my legal sex the "wrong way," redefining the idea of "man" in such a way that I can still possess female anatomy, resist surgically altering my body, and still legally be "male" in the eyes of the state? Or am I feeding into trans invisibility by seeking out a way to conceal my female past? These are difficult questions, to say the least, and I'm still not certain of the answers.

Even though I have physically changed toward the male end of the gender spectrum, I find that I am still in control of how much I pass as male or female to varying degrees. With biology working against me with my small stature and the tell-tale signs of my female past, a gender is often assigned to me by outsiders based on my body language, mannerisms, and intonation. When I follow the binary standards for male behavior, I am more likely to pass as a man, and usually a gay man at that. If I choose to ignore or disobey these rules by crossing my legs at the knees or gesturing too much, I still occasionally find myself designated to the "female" or the "too-androgynous-to-tell" box that makes people uncomfortable. While I felt pressured into fitting these behavior standards in order to pass at the beginning of transitioning, I am starting to resist that pressure and move back toward the middle ground of presentation.

I am finding a way of living comfortably with myself and my gender presentation without being forced to hide my female past in order to do so. Indeed, the only solution to becoming a whole person is to refuse to assimilate and to embrace the idea espoused in Sandy Stone's "Posttranssexual Manifesto." I must go beyond just trying to pass as a desired gender. The only way that things are going to change for transgender people is for us to be vocal and visible about being transgender. By being vocal about our transgendered selves rather than trying to assimilate into the role of either "man" or "woman" (thus becoming "posttranssexual"), trans people open new realms of possibilities of physicalities and identities. Claiming our histories – including those pre-transitioning – allows us to reclaim power in our bodies and to make space within established identities for ourselves to exist.

Of course, it is impractical to ask someone to be "out" 100% of the time in all situations. When I meet a person for the first time, I don't assault them with an in-depth discussion about my gender identity and how that relates to my presentation. As someone who works with at-risk elementary, middle, and high school students, I don't take the time to explain my sexuality and gender to every student who needs help with math homework. However, if students ask questions about me, I would like to answer honestly. Also, if I am expressing my gender in what feels true to me and that happens to coincide with a traditional male appearance, why should that be a problem? The key for me is to be out as transgender in social situations, out to my friends and family, and to be vocal about my trans politics when I need to speak up. I want to feel comfortable discussing my past and not feel stifled into a role as ill-fitting as the female role was for me before I started transitioning. I want to be in control of physically altering my body, regardless of how I identify, regardless of whether or not my body fits into a strictly-defined category. I don't want to be forced into obscuring my past in order to function in the world; I want to be a whole person.

## Attraction Outside of the Binary

Even though my outer appearance may be able to conform more or less to a binary gender category, my physical body has moved into territory where it cannot be neatly classified as either male or female. My politics and identity as a transgender person play out most clearly in the changing physicality of my body and the way that I navigate this in sexual relationships.

After years of testosterone injections, I have a medically-constructed body that is unintelligible to a society upheld by a strict gender binary. How am I supposed to feel attractive and empowered in my body and sexuality when mainstream and gay cultures leave no space for bodies outside of the male/female binary? How do I describe my relationships in terms of the labels “gay” and “straight” when I am not firmly in one of those two categories? Sexual orientation binaries are just as impossible for me to navigate as gender binaries. Even the label “bisexual” implies that there are only two sexes from which to choose, thus excluding bodies like mine from the realm of attraction.

People are often fascinated by my physical body, but it is usually in a way that strips away any sexuality that I have. When people ask me questions about surgeries, it is rarely because they find it attractive or appealing. These questions are usually asked with freakish and desexualized overtones. Often, others try to reduce my identity to my physical body and sexed characteristics, specifically to whether or not I have a penis. After all, how can I even consider myself a “man” (or, at least, “not woman”) when I don't have a dick? Even when these questions are asked with the implication of finding my non-binary body attractive, it is often in a fetishistic way – reducing me and my body to a fantasy waiting to be fulfilled. In the first case, I am stripped of having any sexuality; in the second, I become only a sexual object. Where is the happy medium?

Even *as a transperson* I am supposed to see my own body as non-attractive and deny my own sexuality, according to the traditional medical

discourse. As Jason Cromwell argues in his essay “Queering the Binaries,” “Within the narratives made available through the medico-psychological literature (and, for that matter, through published autobiographies), both MTF and FTM transsexuals are disgusted by and hate their genitalia, and, by implication, sexual acts of any kind are considered equally disgusting and abhorrent” (515). However, this model of self-repulsion hardly reflects my own experiences.

Before I started transitioning, I was admittedly less comfortable with my body. Rather than really thinking about my identity and its relation to my physical self, I survived by ignoring my physical body altogether. As I began exploring my gender identity, I started questioning my investment in my physical self. I began to really look at my body to see what it had to offer and what I wished to change. When I began testosterone injections, the gradual physical changes gave me a heightened sense of self-awareness that bordered on narcissistic. This obsession with my newly discovered body was spurred on by my testosterone-induced leap in libido. I became fixated on exploring my sexuality.

While I had an aversion to vaginal penetration before starting to transition, it fascinated me once I moved into a more male-identified gender. I had never slept with men as a woman, but I was more than ready to explore that territory with queer men with my altered body. My experience was similar to that of author and activist David Harrison: “The whole point of my gender transition was to free myself up. If something feels good to me, I'm not going to stop doing it because it doesn't fit someone else's notion of what a man is” (132). I had found a way to feel more comfortable and present in my body, and I was going to explore that in every way that I could.

I also found it easier to explore relationships and my sexuality once I began to transition. Rather than making it impossible for me to connect with people sexually, changing my body helped me become more confident and comfortable with myself. My confidence and comfort with my body went much further in establishing relationships with people than my discomfort with my strictly female body had allowed me to do.

A challenge in establishing relationships with partners, though, is dealing with labels and identities. By this point, I have dated partners coming from a variety of sexual identities: gay, lesbian, queer, straight, bisexual, and/or something else entirely. While labels can be useful in forming social movements or conceptualizing ideas, they can become an obstacle in forming relationships that aren't easily categorized. If a gay man is in a relationship with me, how does he negotiate his gay identity in relation to his attraction to my body? How much do outside forces, identity politics, and cultural norms play a role in his response to his attraction to me? Sometimes, the outside forces are too much to overcome and the relationship quickly falters. Other times, my partners have been readily accepting of and attracted to my physical body, regardless of the implications toward a specific identity label.

As a person outside of the male vs. female gender binary, I struggle to assert myself in a gay vs. straight world. I prefer fluid and inclusive sexuality labels like “queer,” “pansexual,” or “omnisexual” to describe myself and my sexuality in order to create space for bodies outside of the binary to be visible and desirable. By reclaiming our bodies as attractive through physical alterations that we initiate, we are able to create room for trans bodies to be attractive. I have reconstructed my body through testosterone injections in such a way that I am comfortable in living in it, and presenting my nonconforming body as one that can be sexually desired is a political act within itself. In refusing to assimilate my body into the idea of what a man's body or a woman's body should look like, I am challenging society's ideas of gender and sexuality on a very personal level.

## Intersections

Coming out as transgender did not mean that I had to toss out my feminist politics; to the contrary, coming out as trans helped me to become a better feminist by becoming aware of a new layer of gender oppression based

around a gender binary system. While some of my actions have been damaging, such as lying to the medical industry in order to reach my personal objectives, I have become aware of the problems with these actions in the perception of transgender people as a whole. Through accurately presenting myself to the medical industry instead of assimilating into a strictly defined role, I continue to complicate and expand any narrow definition of what it means to be transgender. Rather than choosing to pass as a “man” in all facets of my life, it is important to me that I continue to out myself – to become “posttranssexual” – in order to effectively challenge the oppressive gender system instead of reinforcing it. By claiming ownership of my trans identity and my non-normative body, I am able to become empowered in myself and to reclaim my sexuality.

Even though I may not know precisely where my journey is taking me, it is important for me to continue living my life in a way that feels truthful to how I see myself and to my political beliefs. I have yet to find a place where I feel entirely comfortable, but I have been moving progressively closer since I chose to begin addressing my identity issues. As I navigate my way through different gender expressions, I hope to get closer to that elusive place where my identity, my politics, and my physical self converge.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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