

Identities claimed, identities assigned: Transgender subjectivities in Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* and Stone's *The Empire Strikes Back*

Charles Syms

In attempts to understand gender, whether by feminist scholars, sociologists, or biologists, the very identities through which transgender individuals situate their lives become continual sites of dispute. Through investigating the way in which various spaces in the academy and professional world employ power hierarchies to strip transgender people of agency in identity, it is possible to not only highlight the injustice but also to encourage change. With examples from sociology, biology and medicine, law, feminist theory, popular culture and the media, this essay addresses the ways in which transgender subjectivities are regulated by supposed authorities without consideration of transgender perspectives. Particularly concerned with the tensions between feminist and queer theory, this essay analyzes how arguments that essentialize gender are at once employed and denied in an attempt to establish a monolithic, exclusive category of “women.” By exploring the various spaces that occupy the realm of transgender identity, from pre-surgical transsexuals to genderqueer individuals, this essay outlines the ways in which external power structures have been used to subjugate and categorize transgender bodies and provides suggestions for how transgender subjectivity can be reclaimed by trans-positive activists.

Identity, at once a regulatory force and a potential source of empowerment, is a multifaceted element of the human experience. Not only does identity change with time, geographical and cultural surroundings, and cognitive development, it also has a major role in legitimizing the experiences of some while falsifying the experiences of others. Transgender individuals—those who identify with or express a gender identity that differs from the one which corresponds to their sex at birth are a minority within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. Thus, they are often stripped of agency when it comes to their identities. Through dismissal of preferred pronouns, discrediting based on the classification of transsexualism as a mental illness, and arbitrary claims about what makes an authentic woman or man, academics and medical professionals ensure that “the people who have no voice in this theorizing [of the transsexual] are the transsexuals themselves” (Stone, Sandy 294).

The feminist movement has a very complicated relationship with the emerging prominence of transgender identities. As an ideology that calls into question the prescribed roles of men and women in society, it seems probable that feminism would embrace the physical transgressing of genders by transgender individuals with open arms. This, however, does not prove to be the case for many feminists. In her book *The Transsexual Empire*, Janice Raymond makes it very clear that she does not see transsexualism as being in line with feminist ideals. Claiming that it “should not be surprising that men, who have literally and figuratively, constructed women for centuries, are now ‘perfecting’ the man-made women out of their own flesh,” Raymond asserts that male-to-female transsexuals—those who were born male and are in the process of becoming a woman, also known as transwomen—are not able to transgress their biological sex (Raymond xv). According to Raymond, biological men will

always be men, no matter what clothing they wear, hormones they take, or surgery they undergo. In fact, Raymond goes as far as to call them “male-to-constructed-female transsexuals,” denying male-to-female transsexuals the right to claim a fully female identity (Raymond xiii). Are not all females constructed in some way? Indeed, feminist theory has a long tradition of challenging essentialist conceptions of womanhood that are employed to limit women to the domestic sphere. If, as Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” then it is possible to understand a transwoman’s process of becoming a woman given the socially constructed nature of the term (de Beauvoir 267). The assertion that male-to-female transsexuals cannot fully become women denies transwomen of—and privileges ciswomen with—the capacity to be authentically female. (Cisgender is an adjective used to describe someone who identifies with the gender assigned to him or her at birth based on biological characteristics. Thus, ciswomen are biological females who also identify as women.)

The conflation of the terms “female” and “woman” in Raymond’s argument is a critical flaw that must be explored. Biological sex, which is assigned at birth, needs to be distinguished from gender, a socially constructed set of roles that are binary in most western cultures. For example, a biological male might not be able to change the chromosomes that make him XY, but he can certainly take on the cultural and physical traits that are associated with women in his society.

Though many parts of Raymond’s argument are disempowering to transsexual individuals, she does raise a valid question of exactly what kind of impact transsexualism has on gender norms in society. She highlights that “[p]ersons who think they are of the opposite sex are...not encouraged to see this as emanating from the social constraints of masculine and feminine role-defined behavior,” reminding her audience that gendered categories are social constructs (Raymond xvii). Indeed, if all gender roles are socially constructed, how does one justify physically altering one’s body to have it align with a socially prescribed set of norms? And while the point Raymond makes is valid, the implied critique is not: Raymond should not expect transsexuals to challenge gender roles any more than people whose biological gender aligns with their gender identity.

Raymond sees the emphasis placed on authentically masculine and feminine gender roles as the problem: “Ultimately transsexual surgery reinforces social conformity by encouraging the individual to become an agreeable participant in a role-defined society, by substituting one sex role stereotype for the other” (Raymond xvii). In her view, simply switching from one side of the binary to the other does not radically alter the oppressive gender hierarchy—instead, it reinforces the hierarchy while refraining from questioning it. Although this is a valid critique of transsexual identities, it is also one that does not incorporate the realities of the transsexual experience. Having one’s gender identity be unaligned with one’s gender presentation can be an incredibly isolating feeling, and openly transgressing gendered norms might be the last goal for someone who is trying to pass as the other gender. In fact, it is Raymond’s firmly established and socially recognized position as a woman that allows her to critique what it means to be a woman in the first place.

Throughout *The Transsexual Empire*, Raymond places a large emphasis on the definition of a “real” woman. According to Raymond, the fact that male-to-female transsexuals were born male is enough to discount them from the category of “real” women. In explaining why she believes this, Raymond turns to an essentialist concept of “[a] female reality that the surgically-constructed woman does not possess” (Raymond xx). Invoking imagery of motherhood and menstrual cycles, Raymond binds femaleness to womanhood in a way that excludes those without biologically female experiences from being included in the elusive category of “real” women. Regardless of how a male-to-female transsexual might identify, Raymond denies the male-to-female transsexual the right to have an authentic woman identity. Thus, Raymond is removing the agency from the transsexual individual and imposing her view of what makes a “real” woman as the criterion by which all women should be judged.

With her harsh view of transsexualism, Raymond serves to position her notion of feminism in opposition to a transsexual identity. Raymond argues that “transsexualism constitutes a sociopolitical program that is undercutting the movement to eradicate sex-role stereotyping and oppression in this culture,” invoking the image that transsexuals represent everything that

feminists stand against (Raymond xxi). In positioning transsexualism and feminism as opposites, Raymond discounts the possibility that transsexuals might identify as feminists and visualize their transsexualism as an expression of a feminist desire to challenge traditional roles for men and women. Once again, Raymond ensures that the transsexual is assigned intent, regardless of whether or not that intent matches up with how the transsexual might see his or her goals in transitioning between genders.

Raymond also problematically imposes her idea of the transsexual’s objective in transitioning. Claiming that “many men [flock] to hormones and surgery to attract other men as artifactual, ultrafeminine women,” Raymond completely discounts the possibility that a trans-identified person might decide to undergo the dramatic changes that come with hormonal therapy or gender reassignment surgery for himself or herself (Raymond xxvi). In this view, the transsexual is defined in terms of another person, which is as problematic as the antiquated notion that wives should be the property of their husbands. As long as Raymond continues to define the transsexual’s intent in relation to others, she strips the transsexual of authority when it comes to his or her aspirations.

In addition to her unjustified assumptions of transsexual desires, Raymond refuses to recognize the preferred pronouns of the transsexual subjects she mentions in her work. When referring to her academic peer Sandy Stone, Raymond writes, “Stone has gotten himself a thorough postmodernist education,” completely disregarding the fact that Stone identifies as a woman (Raymond xxii). Not only is this disrespectful, it reveals a very telling part of Raymond’s belief that she should have the authority to determine who can use which pronouns. Raymond is not just casually using the incorrect pronoun—she is issuing a clear statement to her colleague Stone that she is not a true woman.

As an alternative to Raymond’s regulation of transsexual identities, Sandy Stone attempts to empower the voices of transsexuals in her rebuttal text entitled *The Empire Strikes Back*. Instead of relying on her own personal idea of what transsexuals should desire or experience, Stone employs the lived experiences of actual transsexuals in the formation of her argument.

Stone touches on an interesting point of the contention around the exact moment

when a transsexual person changes genders. Though some transsexuals might say there is no definitive moment, Stone gives the example of Hedy Jo Star, who testifies in reference to her gender reassignment surgery, “the instant that I awoke from the anesthetic, I realized that I had finally become a woman” (Stone, Sandy 286). By citing Star’s experience alongside several dissenting viewpoints, Stone acknowledges that there is no one universal moment of transsexual experience that dictates when one has officially transitioned genders. In contrast to Raymond, who imposes her view of transsexual experience on transsexuals, Stone addresses that there is no monolithic trajectory of a transsexual life and thus empowers transsexual subjectivity.

In order to explain how agency to construct one’s own identity is taken away from transsexuals, Stone employs an extremely powerful metaphor. She describes, “[b]odies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities” (Stone, Sandy 294). Much like the way in which a women’s right to make decisions about her reproductive health is debated by male politicians, doctors and professors are waging the war of legitimacy in identity on the battlefield of transsexual bodies. This metaphor invokes the concept of transsexuals serving as experimental subjects for the academic and medical professionals who are in the authoritative positions to decide if and in what way transsexual people are able to construct their identities. It also ensures the reinforcement of the gender binary, as transsexuals are expected to “pass” as the opposite sex in order to be suitable candidates for gender reassignment surgery. Essentially, transsexuals are coerced into a rigid set of possible identities and risk disqualification for medical treatment if they stray from what the people in power have determined is correct for them.

Acknowledging the detrimental effect that imposed identities can have on trans-identified individuals, Stone reaches out to “the brothers, sisters, and all others who may read [her essay]” and implores them to “use the strength which brought [them] through the effort of restructuring identity, and which has also helped [them] to live in silence and denial, for a re-visioning of [their] lives” (Stone, Sandy 299). Stone directly addresses the people who

are constantly being theorized about, illustrating how she is aware that transsexuals are humans just like everybody else. Raymond, on the other hand, seems to forget (or trivialize) this point. Though openness about transsexuality will not mandate societal acceptance, Stone understands that the more people know about transsexuality, the less they will be able to claim ignorance and justify the identities they impose on such a diverse group of people.

To position Raymond and Stone's arguments within the broader dialogue about transgender subjectivity, it is important to explore real-world examples of the ways in which transgender identities are either claimed or assigned. In an article about transmen—those who were born female and are in the process of becoming a man, also known as female-to-male transsexuals—and their interactions with the gay male community, Shawn Syms quotes a transman who articulates, "it's a common assumption that because they aren't born with penises [that] all trans guys must be bottoms" (Syms 14). Within a community united on the premise of claiming non-heteronormative sexual roles—those not of or pertaining to the practices and institutions that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality, heterosexual relationships, and traditional gender roles as fundamental and natural within society—it might seem surprising that assumptions are made about the sexual roles of others. This assumption, however, mirrors the decisions made by Raymond about who can claim which identities, and illustrates that no community is immune to the idea that the identities of others, particularly those who are transgender, can be determined by another group.

Another dimension through which to look at Raymond and Stone's opposing viewpoints is the legal implication of identities. In the case of child custody and marital law, "judges use a 'body-parts checklist' to determine what sex transsexuals are, using these decisions to invalidate marriages and make transgender parents 'legal strangers' to their own children" (Stone, Amy 592). Thus, it is evident that the ability of outsiders to designate identities for transsexuals has far reaching implications, including the possibility of denying a transsexual parent the right to see his or her children. The power of the law to essentialize gender to an inventory of one's body parts creates a dynamic where transsexuals are pressured to have their gender presentation conform to their anatomical sex in order to

avoid accusations of illegitimacy.

Perhaps one of the most concrete examples of the problems inherent in assigning identities is evident in the case of Brandon Teena. A female-to-male transsexual murdered in Nebraska, Teena was subjected to the questioning of his male identity by feminist observers of his case. Rather than respecting Teena's desire to be recognized as a man, "[s]ome feminists have understood Brandon as a transgressive woman who performed gender and sexuality as a continuum of practices and behaviors rather than a fixed identity" (Eileraas 92). As he is unable to claim his male identity after his death, Teena's identity becomes "a site of contest" for the media, and subsequently a "war over gender pronouns [plays] out in media reports of Brandon Teena's murder and psychological assessments of his gender identity" (Eileraas 96). Teena's murder epitomizes the silencing that transsexuals face concerning their identities, and the projection of identity onto Teena from feminist observers underscores the way in which Teena's desired gender recognition is disregarded in favor of a personal opinion of his gender identity.

The ultimate way in which this contestation of Teena's identity unfolds is on his tombstone. Asserting that "Teena R. Brandon" was a "daughter, sister, and friend," his grave marker imposes an eternal female representation on Earth ("Photograph of Teena Brandon's Grave"). Though arguably the expert on his own gender identity, Teena and his desire to be recognized as male are both disregarded, and a female gender is assigned to him because he was not intersex—that is, he did not possess both male and female sexual characteristics and organs—nor was he taking hormones (Eileraas 94). Teena's grave exemplifies the way in which transsexual gender identities are contested, rewritten or ignored without regard to the transsexual's voice.

Though it has been almost twenty years since Raymond and Stone published the most recent editions of their academic discussion of transgender identities, it is important to note that the dialogue surrounding the legitimacy of transgender identities continues to take place in academia. Most recently, at the 2010 "Pornography as Sexual Violence" conference at the University of New Hampshire, the same contentions evident between Raymond and Stone resurfaced to become a major debate throughout the entire conference. In the words of Joelle

Ryan, a transgender woman who presented at the conference, the lack of a productive dialogue surrounding transgender identities proves that the "sex wars détente continues unabated" (Ryan). At one point during the conference, Ryan found her transgender identity the target of criticism when another conference participant "[launched] into a full frontal attack on [her] as a transgender person." The same tactics of critiquing and silencing transgender individuals while assuming an authoritative position on the topic of transgender identity illustrates how a battle based on identity politics continues to play out on the battleground of transgender bodies. Rather than being outdated after a few decades of slowly but steadily increasing acceptance of transgender individuals, the anti-trans dialogue started by Raymond and challenged by Stone continues to shape contemporary academic discourse surrounding transgender identities. The perseverance of these contentions suggests that the continued regulation of transgender identities and the imposition of the resulting conclusions are occurring entirely outside of the transgender community's sphere of influence.

Given the severe discrimination transgender people face, it is an incredible risk to claim a transgender identity in our society. This is further complicated by the fact that doctors, professors, judges, gay men, feminists, and many other groups feel compelled to designate who can claim what kind of gender identity. In understanding transgender identities, it is essential to pay attention to the way in which non-trans-identified people can deny the voices of transgender people from being heard. As Stone suggests, "[p]erhaps it's time to begin laying the groundwork for the next generation"—a generation in which transgender people are the locus of authority when it comes to their own identities (Stone, Sandy 299).

References

1. de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex* (1949).
2. Eileraas, Karina. "The Brandon Teena Story: Rethinking the Body, Gender Identity, and Violence Against Women." *Michigan Feminist Studies* (2002): 85-116.
3. Monro, Surya. "Beyond Male and Female: Poststructuralism and the Spectrum of Gender." *International Journal of Transgenderism* (2005): 3-22.
4. "Photograph of Teena Brandon's Grave." *FindAGrave.com*. Web. 16 Mar 2009.
- Raymond, Janice. *The Transsexual Empire* (1994).
5. Ryan, Joelle. "Bob Jensen, Lierre Keith *et al.*: The Rabid, Transphobic Hate-Mongering of the Anti-Pornography Movement." *Transmeditations*. 23 Oct 2010. Web. 7 Feb 2011.
6. Syms, Shawn. "Trans Men Loving Gay Men Loving Trans Men." *Capital Extra Ottawa* (2007): 14-15.
7. Stone, Amy L. "Changing Transgender Politics." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* (2007): 592-594.
8. Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." *Body Guards* (1991): 280-304.



Charles Syms is a senior from San Antonio, Texas, majoring in East Asian Studies and Feminist Studies. He is also pursuing a co-terminal Masters degree in Sociology. His honors thesis investigates contentions within the Korean LGBTQ rights movement and the impact they will have on the future of Korea's queer rights movement. Upon graduation, Charles anticipates working in the non-profit sector for a few years before contemplating additional graduate education.