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## **MIND OVER MATTER: ACCOUNTS OF SELFHOOD IN AN AGE OF THEORETICAL GENDER**

### **Introduction: Theoretical Uneasiness from an Uneasy Theorist**

This paper is an attempt to theorize contemporary shifts in transgender meanings, and will argue that the novel contemporary ways in which we give accounts of transgender selfhood have exceeded current theoretical frameworks, causing both the impoverishment of critical thought and the increase of cultural border wars. My own theory production has been both the victim and the product of entrenched divisions within thought about gender identity. The temporal context in which I do this work is one of rapid renegotiations of transgender ontology. Any theory I produce cannot in good conscious proceed without an acknowledgement of these politics of the “real” and the politics of epistemology which come to play so harshly on our interpretations of texts, whether they be academic or embodied. Using a theoretical framework composed of existentialist thought, cultural critique, empirical research, and post-structuralism, I will mount three arguments that describe what has changed about gender identity, and why we have been struggling to grapple with it as transgender theorists and subjects (often to the detriment of advancing our understanding). The first is that the societal/cultural/temporal matrix through which we experience gender identity has fundamentally shifted towards a “theoretical” understanding of gender, prompting revolutions in perspective, in the ways that we narrate identity, and the ways that identity is recognized by others. The second is that this shift towards “theoretical” gender as a modification of dualist Western thought has prompted a movement away from the centrality of the sexed body in transgender identity (as evidenced by recent empirical work on the self-determination of genitalia terminology). The third and final argument is that these shifts in the ontology of transgender identity have affected what is recognizable as “transgender” within the system of intersubjectivity through which we are affirmed as subjects,

and that it is this undertheorized process which prompts personal and theoretical border wars around “realness” and the intelligibility of transgender subjectivity.

In a discipline arranged around themes of selfhood, we theorists of all partialities have done a poor job of acknowledging the impacts of our dynamic culture on selfhood and its intersubjective extensions. Though methods of thought are not easily subverted and are quite impossible to step outside of, our overdetermination of transgender subjects – which fixes rather than frees – needs to be reckoned with before we can move forward in liberatory projects.

### **Theoretical Gender? Gender Identity in an Age of Self-Determination**

Existentialists have long rooted the nuances of human existence in the notion of an “essence of the age” (Heidegger) or the “facticity of a time” (de Beauvoir). According to Martin Heidegger, the essence of an age shapes and determines the questions that we are able to ask about Being. He notes that each age is defined by “leading concepts” in thought, which work their way into public consciousness and effectively prompt “a completely new relation of [people] to the world and [their] place in it” (50). This constellation of ideas can be captured as the “essence” of a particular temporal moment. Though Heidegger references a more traditional philosophy, I venture that the leading concepts in our discussions, theories, and writings about gender function in a similar way to alter one’s relation to the world for those who are personally invested in seeking them out. Judith Butler echoes this idea in her argument that Being is contextualized by a “contemporary order of being” (“Giving” 23). Extending this concept from Foucault, she speaks of contemporary orders as “condition[ing] the possibility of [one’s] becoming” as well as the truth that one offers about oneself (“Giving” 23-24); it is that which determines the manner in which gendered subjects can be intelligible and recognizable by others.

Joining these two resonant ideas, I claim that the “conditions of possibility” are both determined by and productive of the “essence of our age”: in context, that the possibilities and limits of how we individually take up our gender are determined by and productive of the leading concepts in ontological inquiries into gender. What, then, may lived gender have reaped from or fashioned within transgender theory? Led by concepts (ranging back to feminist roots) which take gender to be malleable and at least partially socially constructed, gender has become – in a word – more *theoretical*<sup>1</sup>. As theory becomes increasingly publicly motivated, identity narratives expand to recognize a complexity elided in earlier articulations of subjectivity that were based largely on survival. Theoretical gender personalizes the lack of a cohesive subject by embracing conflicting histories (as Bobby Noble does in his account of his lesbian roots); it abstracts gendered narratives from gendered signifiers (as we see in many non-transitioning subjects); it detaches itself from biological causality. As I explore below, the location of gender shifts, as do the positions from which truth may be spoken. The contemporary order of being and our definition of the intelligible subject are widening based on transgender theorization as a nexus of novel possibility.

One site through which to read this shift towards a “theoretical gender” worldview is the movement away from clinical definitions of transgender. Sandy Stone discusses how, throughout the 1960s, “transgender” was defined through a clinical system which meted out transition-related procedures and care based on what cisgender doctors determined to be objective criteria

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<sup>1</sup> By “theoretical gender” (a term which I will be using throughout the rest of this paper, though it only approximates my intent) I do not mean genders that are less embodied or less real in the practical sense. Rather, I mean genders which take the progressive tenets of gender theory as their social basis rather than the hetero- and cis-normative binary ideals which contextualize the mainstream social experience of gender, and through which many earlier definitions of transgender defined themselves. Thus – by the very fact of existing in our age and conditions, and not through any purported internal psychological causation – subvert the assumed relationships between biology, embodiment, gender, and identity (which define most cis *and* trans subjects), and begin to form their own constellations of meaning from a place of presuppositional detachment.

that existed adjacent to subjective feelings of wrong embodiment (160). Having “transgender” be determined from within the medical system also reveals a legacy of pathologization and dehumanization, demonstrated by the fact that transgender identity (now officially termed “gender dysphoria”) remains in the DSM-V. The reduction of the body to the ontic was, for transgender subjects in this era, both oppressive and productive. The restrictive clinical criteria, Stone points out, “constituted a fully acculturated, consensual definition of gender” and thus represented “the apparatus of production of gender” (160) in a gendered economy where passing after transition was an expected ultimate goal. As issues of passing, transition, realness, and somatechnical body modification become mainstream, the clinically sanctioned method of transition loses power as a definitive apparatus, and the thought which frees us from it takes on some of its influence. Theory, then, becomes a productive mechanism rather than a simply descriptive one because of the inherent role it plays in constructing the essence of our age.

Though all of ways in which this shift in frame may affect gender identity exceed what I can cover in this paper, the taxonomy of transgender is one of the clearest areas in which to read this change. At the beginning of the clinical era, Stone notes, ““transsexuals’ were, *ipso facto*, whoever signed up for assistance” (160). Discourse about gender identity was assumed to be emerging solely from the medical realm, and thus definitions (and ability to give an account of oneself *as trans*) were awarded based on one’s willingness to buy into that discourse<sup>2</sup>. The shift in how we think about gender towards the theoretical and individually agentic translates into movement away from unifying definitions assumed to net all trans subjectivities. Theoretical

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<sup>2</sup> There were, and always have been, exceptions to this model (such as Leslie Feinberg, who lived within this discourse but refused to define hir identity within its bounds). However, for the most part, gender variance outside of defined transsexuality was subsumed under other labels in the 1960s and were more dispersed throughout queer communities.

gender has instead prompted a contentious explosion in micro-identities<sup>3</sup> based on, I argue, the bolstered role of individualism, self-determination and authenticity in contemporary discourses. As Butler reminds us, we can only claim Being that is legible within our particular conditions of intelligibility. Each age has certain norms and practices “that have become presuppositional without which we cannot think the human at all” (Butler “Justice” 57), and these norms include the nonce taxonomies (Sedgwick) through which we encounter identity. When frames of thought change, our nonce taxonomies change to suit them, and thus our conditions of intelligibility alter that which we can veritably *be* at any given time. Rather than younger generations “making up” new genders (as many conservatives accuse), we exist in a feedback loop with the categorical. As much as we respond and introduce constructed taxonomies into our world, these categories construct us in how we performatively narrate and experience gender in context. A label cannot capture or perfectly describe subjectivity; rather, we “use them [as] they use us” (Rubin 253) to create meaning even as they “mold us into historically specific forms of personhood” (Rubin 253). In terms of theoretical gender, Jack Halberstam describes this process in our temporal moment by noting that many younger generations feel “their uniqueness cannot be captured by the applications of a blanket term” (19), and opt instead to create their own terms with a terrifying degree of specificity. No longer needing to rely on a single discourse to affirm transition, taxonomies have proliferated in tandem with transgender theory’s aim to create room for variant subjectivities.

### **Whose Body? Dualism and Somatic Detachment in Contemporary Trans Embodiment**

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<sup>3</sup> By “micro-identities” I mean the proliferation of increasingly specific labels like agender, woman/man-aligned non-binary, demi-boy/girl, etc. which are modulations of larger categories meant to describe unique and ever-narrower gender and sexual identities.

Theory is never independent of context, and therefore theoretical gender owes many of its narrative positions to a legacy of Western thought about subjectivity. I argue that “theoretical gender” has an undeniable basis in the mind/body dualism of Western philosophy, and that this dualism’s presence in gendered understandings has shifted the ways that transgender subjects relate to their sexed bodies. Mind/body dualism, first articulated by Descartes, is the doctrine that claims that mind (spirit; soul) and body (corporeal) are two fundamentally different but interactive things. As Warren and Brewis point out, Western subjects believe the body is always subject to the mind. This is demonstrated by our obsession with dominating our bodies, modelling and sculpting them to ideals of appearance, ability, or health (221). Scientific advancements (of which medical transition is undoubtedly one) cement our capacity to determine our embodiment as progressive (Warren & Brewis 220). Thus, Westerners tend to view ourselves as *having* a body rather than *being* a body, which positions the body as “complaisant biological material, to be reflexively manipulated in terms of portraying who we think we are or how we wish to be perceived” (Warren & Brewis 226).

In many personal narratives, this dualism has been *the* framework through which we have always described trans identity, resting as it does on a mismatch between felt gender (mind) and sexed embodiment (body). Most transgender discourse privileges the mind (which, Stryker notes, is constructed as “ontologically inescapable and inalienable” (10)) over the materiality of the body (which can be changed to conform to the “inescapable”), especially as the body is configured as a means of *expression* and the mind as the necessarily expressible. The accepted narrative of transgender identity is that the mind’s determination culminates in physical changes in gendered embodiment through transition. However, this is another area in which our contemporary order of being has progressed. The adoption of theoretical gender paired with the

convention of privileging the mind over the body has led to a new set of embodiment narratives in which the embodied experience of the flesh itself is bent to the will of the mind outside of the desire for medical intervention. Subjects reconfigure their own understanding of their gendered embodiment to fit their subjective sense of gender. The signifiers and signs of gender, as well as definitions of *meaningful embodiment*, are being determined by transgender subjects themselves rather than being dictated to them institutionally. This can be read as an effect of the theoretical leanings which step away from determinism (whether biological or psychological) and towards the negotiation of a social framework. This phenomenon is demonstrated in the sociological research undertaken by Edelman and Zimman, which looks at trans men (who have not had bottom surgery) and their linguistic depiction of their genitalia in sexual contexts. They discover that among younger populations, accounts of selfhood “contest the notion that trans persons’ bodies necessarily exist in conflict with their self-identified genders” (674). The material existence of “female” genitalia are reworked into the subjective understanding of these men’s genders: terms like “boycunt” and “bonus hole” position bodies as male within a homoerotic sexual context, removing any feminine connotation and instead reconfirming the sign with a masculine signifier. The clitoris is often repositioned as a (smaller) penis, but linguistically imbued with the same penetrative power. Further, they find that these men claim descriptors like “male-bodied”<sup>4</sup> despite lacking a normative penis, suggesting that “sex is, in fact, open to self-determination such that a “male body” can be defined as the body of a (self-identified) man” (Edelman & Zimman 680). For contemporary transgender subjects, the modification of the body takes place at the level of the mind, demonstrating a kind of somatic detachment of embodiment from a more theoretical conception of how we embody gender. Keeping with dualist thought,

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<sup>4</sup> As opposed to the “female-bodied man” terminology used in earlier discussions of transmasculinities.



and moving it into a register where the links between gendered discourse and the body are made clear, this demonstrates that “discourse does not override the truth of the body but rather brings it into social existence” (Edelman & Zimman 674), locating gendered agency and categorical determination firmly within the individual subject. Following the movement away from clinical definitions, the prevalence of the idea that the “mind” can be separated from the “body” in our own experience leads to a radical self-determined reconfiguration of this relationship in which the existential quality of being transgender need not coincide with the desire to transition at all<sup>5</sup>. As I explore in the final section, this subversion of the most basic element of *trans* prompts intersubjective as well as collective tensions.

### **Intersubjective Intelligibility and Transgender Politics of the “Real”**

These shifts in the ontology of transgender identity have affected what is meant by “transgender,” and have deepened the divide between what is considered “real” transgender identity and what is considered a less invested approximation. Because subject positions continue to be created under the transgender umbrella, the redefinition of the category by people who have recently entered it has real effects for people who have built their identity narratives upon its previous meanings. This is due to the fact that outsiders to the LGBTQ+ community tend to amalgamate rather than differentiate between specific identities, and the fact that we affirm being through recognizing other’s subjectivity, when categorical meaning is destabilized there is a higher chance for the misrecognition of transgender subjectivity by the majority of the population. This threat more than justifies the fear of some transgender people (for whom

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<sup>5</sup> This model of identity is becoming more and more common among subjects who claim non-binary identities under the transgender umbrella category. As discussed in much of my other work (available upon request), these individuals use recognizable transgender narratives to describe their identities without transitioning away from their assigned gender socially, medically, or presentationally.

transition has been necessary) that the label is being eroded by genderqueer kids who want to destroy binary gender. This tension – which has led to yet another “border war” – has been theorized as purely generational or as a rift between nonce taxonomies. I contend it has more to do with the ambiguity of the process by which we are recognized as subjects.

Existentialist thought claims that, in a world wherein we always already exist with others, subjectivity is conveyed through recognition by other subjects. Refusing to recognize subjectivity reduces individuals to their ontic facticity or their basic material conditions of being, which constitutes (for de Beauvoir) the genesis of oppression. Recognizing subjectivity, on the other hand, affirms the ontological freedom of the subject and allows that subject to transcend their facticity. Frantz Fanon furthers this model by pointing out that some subjects whose subjugation is readable in their facticity (e.g. the readability of Black skin) are “overdetermined from the outside” (187) and do not get to fulfil the basic existential tenet of determining their own essence through experience. Many trans people who have moved through any sort of transition are subjected to the same overdetermination in the gaze of the other, and this system of denial or affirmation, of being fixed in the body or allowed to transcend it, is definitive of transgender experience. They define an intersubjective experience of being transgender that does not take place when gender is routed through a reflexive reconfiguration rather than a process of transition. Thus, the uncomfortable conflict: trans subjects who change their bodies are often subject to violence at the end of the other’s gaze, while those who adopt a theoretical approach to their identity circumvent this systems in most ways other than through speech. A similar complaint is launched from non-transitioning subjects: that, without falsely bowing to a societal idea of transition, they are misrecognized as cisgender. When either type of subjectivity is recognized as transgender, a notion of the transgender “real” is affirmed within the larger system.

Both the contemporary order of being and the process of intersubjective recognition determine what can *be* and what can be actualized, and are therefore reliant on one another. Butler reiterates that the “terms by which [we] confer recognition” are not individually determined, but that the subject who recognizes and affirms being operates via a “norm of recognition”, becoming an agent of that norm (“Giving” 22). The terms of what comprises a “real” transgender subject are therefore collectively and socially defined, and subject to temporality, as discussed in the first paragraph of this essay.

A striving towards the “real” is a primary tenet of those whose identities have ever been painted as less-than. This includes all trans subjects, for whom the truth of self-accounts has been undermined by the cultural assumed truth of the material body (Stryker 9). The existentialists and post-structuralists I have been citing would agree that there is no objective reality of transgender experience. Rather, realness is a politicized and personalized orientation towards being which aligns with cultural ideals of authenticity and internal identity. It is, says Halberstam, “that which always exists elsewhere, and as a fantasy of belonging and being” (52). Decades of discourse on passing (and passing privilege) remind us that the facticity of the body is privileged over any discursive account of the self in moments of intersubjective recognition. If contemporary gender is just in the mind and not in the body because of somatechnic detachment, the necessity of facticity to trans identity is questioned. Due to shifts in our conceptual understanding of gender and their impact on subjective experience, the mechanism of recognition as trans because a site of contest between transgender people. It is these border wars, which take place both culturally and among corresponding epistemologies, which it is our responsibility to overcome, seeing to solidarity in their place.

### **Conclusion: Notes for a New Theoretical Order**

While my personal reaction to the border wars that stagger our discussion of transgender identity has often been frustration, I hope that my theoretical reaction should be of more concrete use than an aimless anger or ridiculous righteousness. In an attempt to work through my individual position as much as anyone else's, I have argued that the essence of our age and the particularity our contemporary order have widened in order to allow for a more ambiguously and agentically defined transgender subject. This has included a movement away from clinical and institutional definitions of gender and towards a moment of prolific categorical creation. It has also included a reconstitution of embodiment, proceeding from engrained dualism, has seen the production of a new transgender embodiment narrative wherein the modification of the body is discursive rather than physical. Finally, I read these changes in frame as trickling into the complexities of intersubjective recognition, prompting increased tensions between transgender subjects jockeying for recognition as real within a rapidly reforming system of subjectivity.

Theory and knowledge about transgender identity are not immune from the border wars which prevent forward movement. Knowing how the leading concepts within theory make their way through culture and translate into individual accounts of selfhood reveals the necessity of a clearer ethics of theorization. Responsible theory must reckon with the suitability of its own epistemology rather than uncritically forwarding a reality and expecting all subjects to fit within its confines. Butler confirms that expecting or enforcing complete coherence of subjects within a community commits a "certain ethical violence" in the demand that "we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times" (Butler "Giving" 27). Instead of building thought on the assumption of a fixed subject, we should recognize our theory itself as both product and producer of an age, product and producer of embodiment, and product and producer of ontological conflict. We are

never pronouncing from outside; rather, as transgender theorists, we are always meaning-makers in our own right.

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