

Make Me Feel Mighty Real: Gay Female-to-Male Transgenderists Negotiating Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

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Abstract Gay female-to-male transgenderists (gay FTMs) are women who become men, and who then form erotic relationships with other men. Analysis of interviews with five gay FTMs depicts how they rely upon and reproduce distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality in order to make sense of their bodies, their feelings and their interactions. Sex, gender and sexuality are produced as distinct and real through a range of interlocking material, discursive, and interactional practices. These categories of intelligibility function in relation to each other and serve to mutually constitute and reinforce each other. Although the distinctions drawn between sex, gender, and sexuality are real, the veracity of these distinctions is limited given their inextricability in the contiguous terrain of actual human lives.

Keywords desire, female-to-male, gender, materiality, transgender

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Introduction

Gay female-to-male transgenderists are women who have become men, and who feel erotic desire for other men. I conducted interviews with five gay female-to-male transgenderists, referred to as gay FTMs. Two of the interviewees once lived as lesbians, but found themselves erotically attracted to other men after they became men. The other three interviewees had lived as heterosexual women, and their erotic desires for men remained intact after they became men. Gay FTM identities presuppose distinctions between males and females, between men and women, and between homosexuals and heterosexuals, while also demonstrating the permeability of

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these supposedly inviolable distinctions. This article focuses on how the interviewees rely upon and reproduce these same categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. In narratives collected from five gay FTMs, sex, gender, and sexuality emerge as real and distinct means by which individuals make sense of themselves and others. These categories serve to mutually constitute each other and they function only in relation to each other. Although the distinctions drawn between sex, gender, and sexuality are real, I conclude that the veracity of these distinctions is limited given their inextricability in the contiguous terrain of actual human lives.

Methodology

In order to examine both the constitution of distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality and the limitations of those distinctions, I conducted interviews lasting between one and three hours with five gay FTMs. Each had responded to my advertisements on Internet mailing lists and at a national conference for FTMs. During the summer and fall of 1997, I conducted three interviews in person and two over the telephone with a self-selecting sample of white Americans or Canadians living full-time as men. I have used pseudonyms for the interviewees in this article and in all other materials related to this project. Given the modest size of this sample and the duration of the interviews, I do not claim to conclusively describe all aspects of these interviewees' lives, nor can I draw conclusions about how their lives have changed over time. Furthermore, I do not profess to capture the diversity of all gay FTM lives and communities. But my goal is not to draw empirical conclusions *per se* about gay FTMs from the interviews. Rather, I weave together interview material, analysis, and theory to gain insight into the operation of sex, gender, and sexuality from people who actively engage with these categories of intelligibility.

Everyone manages interactions and self-presentation in relation to specific audiences, and we usually do so with some objective in mind. But acts of self-observation and self-reporting carry a special significance for transgender people (Butler, 2001). Transgender people requiring hormones or surgeries must narrate their personal histories convincingly to physicians and to mental health professionals in order to secure these technologies from gatekeeping institutions. Furthermore, transgender people's lovers, friends, family and co-workers may expect them to explain their decisions to transition and to otherwise clarify details of their biographies and bodies. Although transgender people may be repeatedly called upon to perform instrumentally crucial or emotionally fraught acts of self-narration, this ought not to imply that such narratives are unreliable.

We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future . . . We could use some enforceable, reliable accounts of things not reducible to power moves and agnostic, high status games of rhetoric or to scientific, positivist arrogance. (Haraway, 1991: 187)

I endeavored to make the interviews casual, comfortable, and compassionate. Rather than asking a specific battery of questions, I asked each person how he wanted to start and then let him dictate the course of our conversation. The few questions I did ask were intended to follow up on the themes established by the individuals I interviewed. I approach the interview material not as exact renderings of truth, but as narratives offering ‘a critical perspective on the norms that confer intelligibility itself’ (Butler, 2001: 634).

All five gay FTMs with whom I spoke live full-time as men or as man-identified FTMs. Benjamin, who came out as a gay FTM at a relatively young age, lives as a man but had not begun to change his body at the time of our interview. Michael, Phil, Tony, and Joe have already transitioned. ‘Transitioning’ refers to the time during which transgenderists actively execute the physiological and social move from woman to man, or vice versa. In order to maintain their transitions, Michael, Phil, Tony, and Joe take bimonthly injections of testosterone, which stop them from menstruating and induce a range of male secondary sex characteristics, including a deeper voice, increased growth of facial and body hair, enlargement of the clitoris to about one and a half inches in length, and a redistribution of fat and muscle to more male-looking proportions (Sullivan, 1990). FTMs must continue to use testosterone for as long as they want to sustain these male secondary sex characteristics.

Benjamin stated his intention to begin hormones and to have chest surgery a few months after our interview, when he would turn 18. Joe, Tony and Phil have all undergone reconstructive chest surgery, an operation similar to a bilateral mastectomy. Michael told me that he chose to keep his breasts in part so that he could continue to experience erotic nipple sensitivity. None of these FTMs has elected to undergo phalloplasty, the surgical construction of a penis and testicles, nor have any of them chosen metoidioplasty, the surgical unhooding of the clitoris and freeing of it from the tissue beneath so that it can protrude farther. Michael finds these ‘bottom surgeries’ to be extremely costly, and speculated that other FTMs might also consider them prohibitively expensive given their functional flaws and medical risks. Each of the interviewees mentioned that bottom surgeries can complicate urination, do not look enough like penises, and do not become erect. Moreover, the surgical techniques used in phalloplasties are very difficult, and surgically constructed penile tissue

often becomes necrotic, may be rejected by the surrounding tissue, or may otherwise fail to 'take' (Garber, 1993; Meyerowitz, 2002).

While living as a woman, Benjamin engaged in some erotic contact with men. Michael lived as a heterosexual woman and was married to a man before he transitioned. Now in his 40s, he originally transitioned from woman to man in the late 1980s, then transitioned back to woman, but began to transition back to man after surviving breast cancer. Phil, who lived as a lesbian before transitioning, also survived breast cancer. Joe, who is in his mid-30s, identified as heterosexual and was married to a man before transitioning. Tony, who is in his late 20s, also lived as a lesbian before transitioning.

Sexological approaches to gay FTMs

Much of the research focusing specifically on gay FTMs comes from the sexological traditions in medicine and psychology (Coleman and Bockting, 1988, 1991; Clare and Tully, 1989; Coleman et al., 1993; Dickey and Stephens, 1995; Chivers and Bailey, 2000). Coleman, Bockting and Gooren postulate that 'sexual orientation towards men in female-to-male transsexuals may not be as rare' as other researchers have suggested, although they do not speculate about exact numbers (Coleman et al., 1993: 47). According to this body of literature, gay FTMs' vaginas and other female sex characteristics fail to disrupt their identities as men and can even be incorporated into erotic activities with other gay men (Coleman and Bockting, 1988, 1991; Coleman et al., 1993). 'Our observation that reassigned female-to-male transsexuals (without a phalloplasty) fall in love and do succeed in establishing sexual relationships with men (with penises) who view themselves as gay and sometimes engage in peno-vaginal intercourse with our subjects invites us to introduce a nuance [to definitions of sexuality based solely on the biological sex of the body]' (Coleman et al., 1993: 48). Gay FTMs seek sexual partners who will eroticize them as men in ways which include their female sex characteristics (Chivers and Bailey, 2000). But Devor noticed that gay FTMs require a more stable concept of themselves as men than do heterosexual FTMs, because the presence of a male lover's penis can highlight a gay FTM's vagina and lack of a penis (Devor, 1997).

In other sexological studies, gay FTMs are classified as heterosexual because the authors view them as biological females who erotically desire biological males (Dickey and Stevens, 1995; Chivers and Bailey, 2000). This approach excessively privileges the materiality of the body over the discursive and interactional strategies that individuals use to negotiate their bodies, selves, and desires. By contrast, Latour maintains that networks of actors in the world 'are *simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like*

discourse, and collective, like society' (Latour, 1993: 6, emphasis Latour's). To examine only materiality, only discourse, or only interaction would be to reinstate the myth of absolute boundaries between the natural, the social, and the technological, a myth which Latour claims is endemic to modernity (Latour, 1993). Haraway uses the image of the cyborg, 'the offspring of implosions of subjects and objects and of the natural and artificial', to repudiate 'the distinction between science and technology as well as those between nature and society, subjects and objects, and the natural and the artifactual that structured the imaginary time called modernity' (Haraway, 1997: 7, 3). Based on the interviewees' narratives, I maintain that the materiality of their bodies, the discursive strategies they use to make sense of themselves, and their erotic encounters with other individuals all coalesce in the production of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Feminist approaches to transgenderism

All people negotiate sex, gender, and sexuality in order to make sense of themselves in our culture; this coalescence of bodies, discourse, and interaction is not unique to gay FTMs. But transgenderists negotiate this terrain differently from and more actively than non-transgenderists. These differences have incited debates over whether transgenderism reinforces an essentialist, deterministic relationship between sex and gender and whether it strengthens an inviolable opposition between males and females and men and women. Raymond remains the most notorious example of a radical feminist who accused transgenderists as individuals and transgenderism as an institution of directly reinscribing essentialist differences between men and women (Raymond, 1978). Raymond argued that transgenderists were victims of a false gender consciousness and described transgenderism as 'the ultimate homage to sex-role power' (Raymond, 1978: 11). The false-consciousness approach fails to recognize the ubiquity of the sexed body and the compulsory nature of the performance of gender in our culture (Butler, 1990). By implying that a social construction can be eradicated because it is 'only' social, the false-consciousness approach evades the functional reality of the social and suggests a possible state of asocial human perfectibility.

In contrast, the more dominant feminist approach has been to view transgenderism and intersexuality as disruptive of essentialist or deterministic conceptions of sex and gender (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; Garber, 1993; Devor, 1997; Kessler, 1998; Cromwell, 1999). I am sympathetic to this view in that it recognizes the role of human agency in the production and recreation of systems of power and knowledge. This more humanist approach directly opposes the false-consciousness approach by claiming that transgenderism contravenes the deterministic relationship between

sex and gender. However, Hacking observes that if two arguments line up neatly on opposite sides of a question, then they must at least agree on the assumptions that underlie that question (Hacking, 1983). Like the false-consciousness approach, the humanist approach rests on the utopian belief that ‘relief from gender’ is possible and desirable (Kessler, 1998: 117). However, all cultures develop ways to understand and organize bodies, social roles, and desires. These systems vary between and within cultures and historical periods, they may be oppressive, but they do not simply disappear. As Fuss writes, essentialist dichotomy ‘cannot be easily or ever finally dispensed with; it can only be worked on and worked over – itself turned inside out to expose its critical operations and interior machinery’ (Fuss, 1991: 1). At the individual level, the false-consciousness and humanist approaches both seem to imply that transgender people can and should spearhead a revolution on behalf of non-transgender people, either by assuming the risks of living a gender-variant life or by enduring the suffering associated with not altering their bodies and identities if they want to make such changes.

I circumvent this debate because my interviewees’ narratives so consistently illustrate both the durability and the permeability of distinctions between maleness and femaleness, masculinity and femininity, and homosexuality and heterosexuality. Hausman and Butler also each stake out an approach to the study of transgenderism ‘that neither confirms nor denies gender essentialism’ (Hausman, 1995; Butler, 2001: 629). Hausman argues that the focus on gender in the history of transsexuality is a red herring that serves ‘to ward off the disruptive antihumanism of technological self-construction’ (Hausman, 1995: 174). Butler underscores ‘the disciplinary framework’ in which an intersexed or transgendered person ‘develops a discourse of self-reporting and self-understanding, since it constitutes the grid of intelligibility by which his own humanness is both questioned and asserted’ (Butler, 2001: 629). Following their leads, I do not speculate about the dissolution of norms or subjectivities. Instead, I examine how real people negotiate and produce sex, gender and sexuality as mutually constitutive categories of intelligibility in the daily business of living.

The sex of the body

None of the gay FTMs I interviewed had a penis, they all had clitorises and vaginas, and two of them had female breasts. What do the material conditions of these bodies indicate about the conceptual system that considers male and female to be two opposite sexes? The modern concept of sex developed in Europe in the late 17th and 18th centuries, when ‘science fleshed out . . . the categories “male” and “female” as opposite and incommensurable biological sexes’ (Laqueur, 1990: 154). This

two-sex model gradually and unevenly supplanted the previously dominant notion that women and men had basically the same genitals, differing mostly in that women's were internal and men's were external (Laqueur, 1990). Biological and medical research have consequently enumerated a range of sex characteristics meant to indicate a body's maleness or femaleness, including genital, hormonal, chromosomal, and other somatic traits (Bolin, 1994).

Scientific knowledge about sex is mired in the social organization of differences between men and women (Rubin, 1975). The 'discovery of sex' was grounded in existing conceptions of difference and inequality between men and women that structured other aspects of European societies, and the two-sex model further justified these regimes of power and knowledge (Laqueur, 1990). However, the reality and authority of the two-sex model is not impugned by its being an artifact of the societies that produced it. On the contrary, although ample evidence contravenes it, the two-sex model continues to serve as the basis for knowledge about bodies, for technological interventions on bodies, and for organizing the lives of embodied subjects. Hacking argues that scientific theories are representations which can never be perfectly true, but that theories are real enough if they can be used to change the world (Hacking, 1983). 'We shall count as real what we can use to intervene in the world to affect something else, or what the world can use to affect us' (Hacking, 1983: 146). The possibility of changing the body from one sex to another contravenes the theory that male and female are truly opposite. But sex is nonetheless real: it organizes how people understand their bodies, it enables people to conceive of changing their bodies, and it serves as the basis for biomedical interventions on individuals' bodies.

The biomedical technologies and techniques of sex change coalesced from several medical fields, including endocrinology, reconstructive surgery, and from the use of these methods to intervene on the bodies of intersexed children (Hausman, 1995; Meyerowitz, 2002). The discovery that males and females both have combinations of testosterone and estrogen in their bodies was crucial to the refinement of the two-sex model from a polar conception of sex to a scalar conception of male and female as lying on a spectrum (Meyerowitz, 2002). Based on this scalar conception of sex, and using newly available hormonal technologies and surgical techniques, a handful of European doctors attempted to change the sex of animals in the first two decades of the 20th century, and by the 1920s were experimenting on humans (Meyerowitz, 2002). Media coverage of Christine Jorgensen's 1952 transition from male to female, and subsequent coverage of other openly transgendered people, helped introduce the possibility of changing sex to the public imagination in the United States (Meyerowitz, 2002).

Benjamin, Joe, and Phil each told me that they had wanted to become men before puberty and before they knew about the existence of transgenderism. But Hausman argues that ‘public knowledge about medical advances and technological capabilities produces a situation in which individuals can name themselves as the appropriate subjects of particular medical interventions’ (Hausman, 1995: 23). Joe told me that as a child he envied the heroine of a television movie who underwent a mastectomy as treatment for breast cancer. He remembers thinking ‘my God, maybe I can have a mastectomy and a hysterectomy. And you’re twelve years old; you can’t say that to your parents. You’re stuck.’ Indeed, gatekeeping institutions and physicians may require patients to report just such persistent desires for sex change technologies as criteria for deserving those treatments (Bolin, 1994; Hausman, 1995).

Thus the familiar trope of transgender people feeling themselves to be the wrong sex relies on the two-sex model and presupposes the possibility of changing sex. For example, Joe described himself as having ‘exhibited classic gender dysphoria from an extremely early age. I would throw a fit if anyone tried to put a dress on me. I asked people to call me Jeffrey. I pretended to pee standing up. ‘Michael’ always felt there was ‘something missing down here. I would always roll up a sheet or bunch my pajamas or make a little dick out of Kleenex and put it in my pants.’ As young girls, Joe, Phil, Michael, Tony and Benjamin reported that they consistently identified themselves as boys, and were often mistaken for boys by others. For these females, feeling like men or boys provoked considerable anxiety and emotional pain, which was not confined to childhood or puberty. Benjamin told me, ‘I think what is hardest for non-trans people to understand is the discomfort with my body . . . Having to use the girls’ locker room for gym is just humiliating. If I have to use the bathroom, I hope not to’. Joe lamented, ‘I couldn’t relate to anyone as who I was. No one could see who I was. And there are people who say it doesn’t matter, it’s just a body. And I say no, it matters very much . . . I made no sense as a human being.’

The gendered self

Joe refers to a self that struggles to make sense of its body. He told me that, for him, transitioning ‘is about living in a body that doesn’t make you sick and alienated every time you look in the mirror or take a shower’. Phil described what he called his ‘intense bouts of gender dysphoria’ in the following way,

I’d look at myself in the mirror, and it was like how I felt inside and what I saw in the mirror did not match. I’d wake up in the morning and rub my face and I’d fully expect to feel stubble there, and I was very surprised when I didn’t. Or

I'd scratch my chest expecting to feel my hairy chest and there would be breasts there. There was one time when I went into the bathroom and I had a facial scrub and I was sort of sleepy and I took this facial scrub and I smeared it around the beard area as if I was about to shave and I suddenly realized, oh my God, I don't have a beard.

Throughout the interviewees' portrayals of their desires to transition, gender consistently emerged as distinct from biological sex. Individuals achieve gendered meanings through 'a complex of . . . perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures"' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126). Nicholson describes the widespread conception of sex as the 'coat-rack' upon which gender is hung, such that gendered meanings and gendered relations of power are thought to proceed inevitably from the anatomical differences between males and females (Nicholson, 1995). In conjunction with legal, institutional, and economic ways of marking gender, activities such as clothing styles, speech patterns, and ways of holding and moving the body reinforce the notion that anatomical males are men, anatomical females are women, and never the twain shall meet (Devor, 1997, 1998; Elkins and King, 1998; Bolin, 1994).

How did it become possible to conceive of a gendered self that stands apart from the sexed body? The contemporary use of gender to describe a sense of self separate from the body emerged from the medical and psychological treatment of intersexed children (Hausman, 1995, Kessler, 1998, Meyerowitz, 2002). In a 1955 article about medical and psychological interventions on intersexed people, Money originated the use of the term 'gender' to describe the sense of being a man or a woman, and to distinguish men's and women's differences in 'outlook, demeanor, and orientation' from their biological differences in hormones, gonads, chromosomes, and other somatic traits (Money, 1955 cited in Meyerowitz, 2002: 114). Money established standards for intervening on the bodies of intersexed babies based on the idea that the body must be made intelligible as male or female 'as early as possible if gender identity is to develop successfully' (Kessler, 1998: 14). This approach to the treatment of intersexuality staked out a difference between the natural and the social whereby gender operates apart from the sexed body. This distinction between sex and gender also made possible biomedical interventions on the bodies of non-intersexed people. 'Whatever the labels used – "psychological sex", "gender role orientation", or "gender identity" – the disjuncture between the sense of self and the biological body increasingly entered into explanations of transsexuality' after the 1950s (Meyerowitz, 2002: 19).

The refusal of the gay FTMs I interviewed to construct their masculinity in a way which obscures the parts of their lives lived as women reinforces the distinction between sex and gender. Although Benjamin

'intends for people to see me as male', he does not 'think it's necessary for me to live in the pretense that I was born male'. For Michael, 'There's a continuity. I'm still the same person'. This openness about the gendered self as the fashioner of its sexed body is consistent with the primacy placed on self-expression and self-improvement in contemporary individualistic cultures. This openness diverges from the standard among physicians and psychologists, who may judge the success of sex changes based on how well transgender people can pass as always having been of their reassigned sex (Kessler and McKenna, 1978). Men who want to become women, or vice versa, have even been denied treatment by physicians who doubt they will look or act convincingly like their reassigned sex after transitioning (Meyerowitz, 2002).

The notion that female women can become male men relies upon and reproduces distinctions between body and self, between sex and gender, and between the natural and the social. Each of the gay FTMs I interviewed reported feeling the need to change the sex of their body in order to live as men. Sex and gender are thus functionally distinct in that the gendered self can choose to change the sex of its body. However, the interviewees' bodies have both male and female sex characteristics and, as will be detailed later, they describe shoring up their masculinity through discursive means and in sexual interactions with other gay men. For example, Michael told me, 'I've really had to do a psychological number on myself' in order to feel like a man because of his female breasts. The subsequent descriptions of these gay FTMs' erotic desires and interactions will indicate that, despite the real distinctions between sex, gender and sexuality, these categories are mutually constitutive and inextricably enmeshed.

Erotic desire

The entanglement of sex, gender, and sexuality is evidenced in actual medical protocols for the treatment of intersexed and transgender people. Physicians perform otherwise unnecessary surgeries on intersexed children so that their patients will later be able to engage in heterosexual peno-vaginal intercourse (Kessler, 1998). Vaginoplasties for transgender adults are also designed to allow for penile penetration (Meyerowitz, 2002). Most FTM transitions fall short of this penetrative heterosexual ideal because phalloplasties are so uncommon and because they rarely allow for penetration anyway (Sullivan, 1990). Moreover, transgenderists who indicated to clinicians that they would engage in anything besides heterosexual activity after their transition have until recently been denied access to biomedical interventions, thereby excluding gay FTMs or lesbian male-to-female transgenderists (MTFs) unwilling to tell the right story to gatekeepers (Sullivan, 1990; Bolin, 1994).

Heterosexism aside, the surgeries meant to enable intersexed people to engage in heterosexual intercourse and the sexological classification of gay FTMs as heterosexual because they have female bodies and erotically desire male partners both rest on the notion that sexuality depends solely on the sex of two interacting bodies (Dickey and Stevens, 1995; Kessler, 1998; Chivers and Bailey, 2000). The concept of sexuality as a distinct category of intelligibility presupposes the two-sex model and, historically speaking, predates the distinction between sex and gender. Until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, erotic activity between men or between women was among the many behaviors grouped together as ‘inversion’ (Chauncey, 1989; Vicinus, 1993). As scientific and legal knowledge in Europe and English-speaking North America elaborated increasingly specific categories of sexual pathology out of this range of non-normative behaviors, the category of homosexuality (and later that of heterosexuality) came to be applied to specific kinds of people (Foucault, 1978; Hacking, 1986; Chauncey, 1989; Vicinus, 1993).

The interviewees all relied on concepts of sexuality and homosexuality in describing the erotic desires they felt for men before they transitioned. For example, Phil, who engaged in lesbian sexuality before his transition, remembers pretending as a child that

I was Paul and George of the Beatles, and they would take turns having sex with one another. Even though I didn’t quite know what sex was at that time, they were doing it. So from a very early age, my sense of myself has been male, and my sense of my sexuality has been homoerotic.

Michael, who engaged in heterosexuality before transitioning, claims to have always identified with the penetrator in his sexual fantasies. He recalled his pre-transition marriage to a man in the following way:

As much as I was attracted to guys, sexually it would always go blah. I remember a guy I was seeing and we were having sex probably about once every two months. I had to get rat-ass drunk every time I did it. Because I would look down at this female body and I would go ‘Who’s that?’ ‘It’s me!’ . . . Somebody was sticking something in me when I was supposed to be sticking something in them. And people were saying, ‘Well why can’t you just be an assertive woman and be on top?’ But it just wasn’t the same. I don’t think I was ever really able to go after the men who sexually attracted me. I was in relationships with men where the sex was never that great.

Joe described his sexual life as a heterosexual woman before transitioning in a similar way:

I was with a man, but that was the only part I was getting right . . . Genetic people [those whose sexes and genders ‘match’] think of sexuality only in terms of the object. They think that as long as you have what you’re attracted to, you’re fine. But what’s missing is how they’re relating to you. But for us, that’s

totally skewed and it makes a huge difference. The marriage fell apart. I was so unhappy. I was dying inside.

Faced with the same difficulty, Benjamin tried dating a bisexual man because he 'hoped that that would make some sort of difference, that he could see me as a guy, but that didn't work. He only liked me as a girl'.

Before their transitions, Michael, Joe, and Benjamin all engaged in sexual contact with men, but their sexual encounters reportedly never felt right because of their female bodies and their identities as women. A range of empirical studies suggest that sexuality creates meaning about and through the sexed bodies and gendered identities of both individuals involved in an erotic interaction (Padgug, 1999; Simon and Gagnon, 1999). Cross-cultural and historical work also indicates that people produce gendered meanings through erotic activity, and that they understand the erotic through the lens of sex and gender (Weinberg, 1978; Chauncey, 1989; Kennedy and Davis, 1994; Kulick, 1998). Butler argues that 'gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes' (Butler, 1993: 15). In light of the problems the interviewees encountered in their sexual relationships with men when they were still women, I propose that the inverse of Butler's argument is also true: sexuality is crucial to establishing gender and sex, even as gender and sex are constituted through sexual interactions. The distinctions among sex, gender, and sexuality serve as the basis for mutual intelligibility between members of our culture. But these categories themselves are intelligible only in terms of each other: they serve to constitute each other, and they function together in interactions among social actors.

Sex, gender and sexuality in interaction

The mutually constitutive character of sex, gender, and sexuality is illustrated in these gay FTMs' descriptions of their erotic interactions after transitioning. Erotic encounters emerged as critical sites for the management of the interviewees' female sex characteristics, their emerging male sex characteristics, and for the production of their identities as homosexuals and as men. After becoming men, the interviewees negotiated the material, discursive, and interactional dimensions of sex, gender and sexuality in (unsuccessful) erotic encounters with women, in erotic interaction with other gay FTMs, and in erotic contact with gay men who were born male.

Tony and Phil had both practiced lesbian sexuality before they became men, and both were surprised to find themselves attracted to men after transitioning. Tony recalled, 'When I told my parents I had a boyfriend,

my mother was like, “You, who wanted to be with women all this time, and now you’re with men? I don’t understand!” Like his mother, Tony did not immediately grasp that becoming a man had rejiggered his sexuality such that he no longer erotically desired women. He told me,

When I started taking hormones, I was dating this woman who lived in London. She spent a month [here] over the summer, and then she came back in October. And between the time she left in the summer, which was like the most fabulous romantic month of my entire life, and the time she came back in October, something happened . . . I could not for the life of me figure out why I couldn’t get into having sex with her . . . I knew that I was attracted to men before, but I didn’t realize that I was going to have to, at least for the time being, give up my attractions to women.

Phil was in a relationship with a lesbian MTF who sensed that he would become gay after he became a man. He told me,

With gender changes you just can’t predict what’s going to happen. The chemistry changed between us. She was not attracted to me initially and I found that I was not as sexually attracted to her. From being a lesbian for fifteen years, it just doesn’t do it for me. I can find women attractive, but there’s just not this trigger. The idea of being with a woman sexually, what goes on in my mind is, I haven’t a clue what to do. I have no clue how I would relate. The idea of heterosexuality to me has always been very alien.

Like Tony and his mother, I do not claim to understand precisely how these gay FTMs’ sex and gender changes precipitated shifts in their erotic desires. But these shifts lend credence to the idea that as sex and gender change, they may constitute sexuality differently over the course of a subject’s life.

While their lack of erotic desire for women helped Tony and Phil to make sense of their sexualities as new men, sexual encounters with other gay FTMs contributed to Tony, Phil and Joe’s conceptions of themselves as masculine. Tony told me that, because he was accustomed to the similitude of lesbian eroticism, ‘there’s something about the sameness of being with another FTM that’s nice’. Joe’s first FTM lover ‘was someone I could trust, despite my body being this way. He’s somebody who could see me as a man’.

As the reader is by now aware, at the time of our interviews, none of these gay FTMs had a penis, Michael and Benjamin both had breasts, and all of them had clitorises and vaginas. As Michael incisively pointed out, ‘I don’t know a lot of non-FTM men who don’t have dicks’. Because ‘sexual attractions . . . appear to be activated on the basis of genders which persons usually presume will later be substantiated by appropriately sexed bodies’, all of the interviewees reported some degree of difficulty in

forming erotic relationships with male-born gay men (Devor, 1997: 607). Tony described these difficulties in the following way:

I look like a guy and no one would ever know what I look like without my pants on until they see me without my pants on. So it's hard to navigate that kind of disclosure every time you want to flirt with someone. It gets really tired, and you don't even want to bother. But . . . I don't want to have to apologize for being a tranny [transgender person] any more. I don't want to have to say . . . there's something wrong with my body, because there's nothing wrong with my body. That's just the way it is and if you can't deal with it that's your shit not mine. If you can connect with me and deal with me on every level except for the fact that I don't have a penis then what the hell is that all about?

Tony lamented that when a gay man 'can't deal' with his not having a penis, 'it's not about there being anything wrong with me; but don't think it doesn't profoundly affect my sense of self esteem, and don't think that rejection isn't really painful'. Tony has been rebuffed by gay men who 'have really freaked out . . . and said "Oh my god, if I can have sex with him then why can't I have sex with a woman? And if I can have sex with women then I'm not really a gay man"'. Weeks observes that 'the genitals continue to have a deeply rooted role in sexual imagination and identity' (Weeks, 1989: 77). This fundamental inseparability of sex from sexuality renders gay FTMs undesirable to some gay men. I would add breasts and other secondary female sex characteristics to Weeks' observation, based on Michael's derision of recently-transitioned gay FTMs 'who get all huffy because some gay man didn't want to go out with them. It's like, honey, look in the mirror: you're still very feminine.'

Further material changes to his body helped Tony to interact more successfully as a man. He told me that having chest surgery 'made a really big difference in not only the way I was perceived and treated . . . but in a way that I can interact with people that I couldn't before because I was always so worried about someone touching me in the chest that I would flinch and wouldn't let people get near me'. But individuals also formulate sexual identities 'based more on social statuses, such as gender, rather than on biological characteristics' (Devor, 1998: 251). According to the interviewees, discourses about the masculine self and sexual interaction with the right partners serve to shore up gender and produce a homosexual identity. Tony reported that even when he was a woman,

I fantasized a lot about having sex with men when I was having sex with women and I still had sex with men when I was a dyke, but only when I could find someone who could see me as a boy. It involves knowing someone well enough that they can know who you are inside, irrespective of what you look like on the outside. The one lover that comes to mind was really great . . . he was totally into my body and was very affirming of my identity at the same time, and was referring to me as a boy.

Phil offered a similar description of how masculinity can be produced through erotic activity with other gay men – not just despite female sex characteristics, but including them. He said,

I don't have a dick. I don't have a dick in the way most people think of a dick. I actually feel like I do have a dick, it's just really small, it's not big enough to penetrate anybody with and so I just assumed that no gay man would want to be with me or even be able to perceive me as being male. I think that there's still part of me that feels that, but I've had a lot of sex in the past few years with men . . . and I started doing that before I actually had top surgery, but I wanted to be sexual with the body I had. There really were quite a lot of men out there who really don't give a shit . . . It's really made me think about how one defines being a man. I wouldn't define a man as what's between one's legs, but it's so pervasive in the culture that it's hard not to take that on. Especially in gay men's culture.

His eventual transitions in sex, gender, and sexuality changed Phil's body, his erotic tastes, and his moral evaluation of his sexual activities. He continued,

My genitals have changed. Things have grown. I really like penetration, in my pussy, in my man-pussy. I don't know what to call it. I hate all these technical names. I happen to like that and it actually feels better now than it ever did . . . I feel like I'm just way more in my body than I was [before transitioning]. It's almost like my ability to feel pleasure because I'm more congruent is just heightened . . . I find that I'm able to have fuck-buddies, and I couldn't do that before with women. When I first started doing the [personal] ads, I had to undo so much programming because having been raised female, if you're engaging in slutty behavior it has this really negative stuff around it. I was still carrying that around.

As Phil's experience shows, gay FTMs can incorporate their breasts and vaginas into homosexual activity with other men in ways that reinforce their masculinity and heighten their sexual pleasure. Michael recalled a conversation about vaginas which suggests that by narrating a uniquely homosexual masculinity in which penetrability reinforces the sense that one is a man, gay FTMs can mitigate the femininity of their female sex characteristics more readily than heterosexual FTMs can.

A lot of people want to just get it sewed up. I heard one [heterosexual FTM] say that he got upset when he got sexually aroused because he lubricated and the lubrication reminded him that he was female. And I said just look at it as pre-come, who cares? But damn, it was like he couldn't maintain his own gender masculinity with this constant feeling of having a vagina. Whereas with transfags, it's like hey, you can fuck me in the vagina, you can fuck me in the back, if one hole's good, two holes are better. And they both feel good.

In Michael's retelling, the physical body, gendered discourse, and erotic interaction coalesced to constitute his maleness, his masculinity and his homosexuality. Gay FTMs' female sex characteristics do pose difficulties in erotic encounters with male-born gay men. But for the gay FTMs I interviewed, erotic activity with partners who can perceive them as men served to produce and affirm a sense of their bodies as male and of themselves as gay and as men. Phil's account of one of his gay male lovers illustrates this entanglement of physical bodies, erotic desire, and gender identity in gay FTMs' sexual interactions. He described his lover as thinking, "This is fucking a guy who has a pussy; this is something a little bit different". But he still felt like he was fucking a guy. There was slightly different plumbing, but he still felt like he was relating to a guy'.

Conclusions

I have examined this interview data in terms of how these five gay FTMs describe deploying material, discursive, and interactional practices in order to render themselves intelligible to themselves and to others. Michael, Tony, Phil, and Joe changed (or, in Benjamin's case, planned to change) the sex of their bodies, indicating that differences between males and females are functionally real but not inviolably fixed. The gendered self's desire to intervene on its sexed body reproduces the distinction between sex and gender and between the natural and the social. But the interviewees lacked penises and retained many female sex characteristics, a material condition that made them unacceptable sexual partners for some male-born gay men. Bodily sex and gender identity therefore both constitute the sexuality of interacting erotic partners. However, the interviewees were able to reinforce their maleness, their masculinity, and their identity as gay men through discursive means and in erotic contact with male-born gay men and other gay FTMs. This indicates that erotic interactions in turn serve to reify sex and gender.

Sex, gender, and sexuality are constitutively enmeshed over a range of discursive, material, and interactional practices. 'At the start of the twenty-first century, we routinely distinguish sex, gender, and sexuality, but we cannot, it seems, seal off the borders' (Meyerowitz, 2002: 4). Indeed, we cannot seal off the borders because these categories of intelligibility are inextricably imbricated in the lives of individual subjects. Like the distinctions drawn between the natural and the social, distinctions between sex, gender, and sexuality are real, but they are not true. The gay FTMs interviewed here are unique in how they negotiate sex, gender, and sexuality, but we all traverse this same unruly and contiguous terrain.

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