Across and Beyond: The Semantics of Transgender Identity

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Abstract: This paper examines two senses of the term "transgender:" transgender as across the gender binary and transgender as beyond the gender binary. Explored are the difficulties this ambiguity poses to transpeople. In short, using the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Richard Rorty, this paper argues that the meaning of "transgender" must simultaneously embrace both senses of the term, rather than one or the other.

> "When I spoke, I had a chance to educate, and, paradoxically, I became less of a freak."
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> - Kate Bornstein, *Gender Terror, Gender Rage*

Transgender is not a regularly-used word in most people's vocabularies. For others, transgender is the word that defines their *lives*. It's the term that defines not just their day-to-day experiences, but also their selves, their identities. For those with only the rare encounter with transgender, the term may conjure an image of a drag king or perhaps recall the famous case of Christen Jorgenson. Some people may simply know it as the "T" in LGBTQ. In a way, all of these are correct. Sally Hines' book *Transforming Gender* broadly describes transgender as "incorporating practices and identities such as transvestism, transsexuality, intersex, gender queer, female

and male drag, cross-dressing and some butch/femme practices."[1] Of course there are much narrower definitions. Holly Boswell points out that until 1990, only transsexuals, cross-dressers, and drag kings and queens were considered transgender.[2] It's obvious, then, that the term "transgender" has no agreed-upon definition.

Despite this, the word must have some common meaning to be useful. Breaking down the word reveals two components: the root "gender" and the prefix "trans-." The root "gender" is in its own right an ill-defined term, but for the purposes of this paper, I will take it to mean the gender binary of male and female. Whether this is socially or biologically determined is a frequent argument in gender studies. The prefix "trans-," on the other hand, has two oft used meanings. It may mean "across" as in the word "transcontinental," which means "across continents." Or it may mean "beyond" as in the word "transcend," which means "to move beyond." In this way, transgender is a polyseme, a word with multiple meanings. Simply put, it may mean either "across gender binaries" or "beyond gender binaries." This paper will examine the use of the term in the sense of "across" and in the sense of "beyond." It will also address the problems that the ambiguity of the term poses to transpeople. Finally, using Ferdinand de Saussure and Richard Rorty, it will offer potential solutions to better define the term to fully represent transgender experiences. It needs acknowledgment that this paper can only speak on transgender as it is used in the West, specifically English speaking countries. Other geographic areas and languages have different terms (and in many cases different genders), and as such, the scope of this paper cannot fully address them.

I will begin by examining "transgender" in the sense of "across gender binaries." In this sense, the transgender individual is bounded by the male and female binary. In other words, s/he must identify as either a male or female. This sense of the term has been used by cisgender individuals critical of transgenderism, transpeople, and the medical community. This paper will borrow the definition

[1] Sally Hines, *Transforming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007): 1.

[2] Holly Boswell, "The Transgender Paradigm Shift Toward Free Expression," in *Current Concepts in Transgender Identity*, ed. Dallas Denny (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998): 55.

of "cisgender" from the Midwest Trans and Queer Wellness Initiative: "a person whose gender identity aligns with the identity that was assigned to them at birth based on their visible, physical sex."[3]

Janice G. Raymond, a self-described lesbian feminist and cisgender individual, was one of the first feminists to broach transgenderism, albeit in a way highly accusatory of transpeople. Critical of transgenderism for being inauthentic, she says:

> All transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves. However, the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist violates women's sexuality and spirit, as well. Rape, although it is usually done by force, can also be accomplished by deception.[4]

Raymond is not only saying that transsexuals are restricted to either male or female; she is asserting that transsexuals are restricted to the gender that they are born with. Male-to-female transsexuals specifically are not female at all, and in order to deceive women, must actually know full-well that they are men, and will always be men. For this individual to say otherwise is rape because they are "reducing the real female form to an artifact."

Transgender theory began partially as a response against Raymond's offensive account of transgenderism in this text, a transgenderism that Raymond believes is morally equivalent to rape. This does not mean that all transgender individuals disagree with the fundamental assumption that sex and gender are concrete entities, however. Many transpeople themselves assert that gender binaries do exist in some way. Their transgender identity hinges on the difference between their felt gender and their biological sex. This difference actually defines the "logic" of the

[3] Midwest Trans* and Queer Wellness Association, "GenderQueer and Queer Terms | Midwest Trans* & Queer Wellness Association," <http://www.genderqueercoalition.org/terms> (13 February 2012).

[4] Janice G. Raymond, "Sappho By Surgery: The Transsexually Constructed Lesbian-Feminist," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006): 134.

transgender experience.[5] According to Jay Prosser, the material body is necessary to transgender identity.[6] Because the body has a male or female sex and because transpeople feel a disassociation with that physical sex, the male/female binary plays an integral role in trans identity. This is often called the "wrong body" phenomenon, as the feeling is as though the individual inhabits the wrong body. The experience of many trans individuals seems to reify this. One trans individual who was born biologically female says, "I'd always just identified as being male, I'd never thought of myself as anything else."[7] His gender is wholly male, despite his female genitals, and always has been.

Rather than feeling as though they transcend gender, most trans individuals assimilate fully into the opposite sex by attempting to "pass" and through body-modification surgery.[8] A transgender person is considered to pass when s/he cannot be recognized as a transperson by the members of society. This way, s/he lives life as solely male or solely female, practically identical to the way cisgender people live their lives. In order to completely assimilate, many transpeople surgically transform their genitals to match their desired sex. This genital-reassignment surgery may actually reinforce gender binaries. One post-op transsexual says, "I'm not a *muchacho*…I'm a *muchacha* now…a girl."[9] A second says, "In the instant that I awoke from the anaesthetic, I realized that I had finally become a woman."[10] These individuals experienced a direct movement from their former, male selves to their female selves, the selves they always desired to be. Because of this, Prosser asserts that surgery is necessary for establishing their "real" gender, a gender which fits the gender binary.[11]

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[5] Quoted in Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 151.

[6] Ibid., 150.

[7] Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 50.

[8] Boswell, "The Transgender Paradigm," 58.

[9] Sandy Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006): 225.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Jagger, *Judith Butler*, 152.

Additionally, the terms that transpeople use establishes transgender as across rather than beyond. In a survey of thirty transpeople, the most common terms used to describe themselves are "MtF," "FtM," "transwoman," and "transman."[12] By using male and female in self-description, these terms suggest that transpeople must occupy some position on the gender binary. The "MtF" identity can be interpreted as a very clear shift from the male gender to the female gender. The fact that these people do include former-selves as well as current-selves in their description indicates a distinct transition from one gendered pole to the other. However, these terms do establish that, for instance, an MtF person is different from a simply female person. In this sense, the transition is not final; those who are MtF or FtM are between the poles of the binary. To articulate this, some transpeople have proposed the idea of a gender continuum to describe their experiences as beyond.[13] This continuum, also referred to as a rainbow or spectrum, describes gender as the range of traits considered male or female. These notions conserve the binary poles, however.

The medical community, which includes the doctors who perform the surgeries as well as the sociologists and psychologists who study transpeople, appear to have defined transgender in the across-sense. One of the first clinics established to study the transgender was the Stanford Gender Dysphoria Program. Founded in 1968 by surgeons and psychologists, it served to better understand what they called "gender dysphoria," or what we would now call transgenderism. It concluded that "a transsexual is a person who identifies his or her gender identity with that of the 'opposite' gender."[14] Essentially, the program only defined the transsexual as a person experiencing the wrong body phenomenon. This program also performed reassignment surgeries; however, it selected participants on how well they behaved as the opposite sex.[15] As such, the medical community came to deem transsexuals as only those who wish to fully assimilate as the other sex. Any individual failing to totally occupy the binary gender-position opposite their birth sex is not transgender from the medical perspective. Additionally, physicians in the United States

[12] Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 70.

[13] Ruth Hubbard, "Gender and Genitals: Constructs of Sex and Gender," in *Current Concepts in Transgender Identity*, ed. Dallas Denny (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998): 53.

[14] Stone, "The *Empire* Strikes Back," 222.

[15] Ibid., 227-228.

regularly pressure parents with so-called intersex babies to choose their child's sex. Usually the physicians recommend that they turn them into "real" females, as the cosmetic result is less-ambiguous than that of a "real" male.[16] In the medical community, there is no room for ambiguity between male and female.

On the other side of the term, there is a sense that transgender is beyond a binary framework of gender, that transgender cannot be captured by simple manipulation of the terms male and female. Although many who see transgender as beyond gender are transgender themselves, with cisgender people, too, there is a subtle recognition that a transperson cannot be easily fit into male or female. In "Gender Terror, Gender Rage," Kate Bornstein describes her experience as a transwoman at her office. When she first transitioned, the manager became distressed at the thought of which bathroom she should use. Discontented with Bornstein using either restroom, the manager decided that she should use a bathroom on a different floor, a floor torn apart during an abandoned construction project. The bathroom itself was never maintained.[17] The manager recognized that she was neither male nor female, and that she could not be fit into a category. However terrible this story may be, it illustrates that for the transgender, the terms "male" and "female" do not capture their identity within society. We see this faint recognition once more with gender play. Gender play, which is essentially playing with concepts of masculinity and femininity, within popular culture is acceptable for the most part; Take the personas of David Bowie, the Rolling Stones, and Madonna for instance.[18] None of these celebrities would consider themselves transgender, but many of their traits could hardly be considered to coincide with their traditional gender. The fame surrounding these individuals for their transgressions indicates slight acknowledgment that the barrier between genders can acceptably be dismantled.

[16] Ruth Hubbard, "Gender and Genitals: Constructs of Sex and Gender," in *Current Concepts in Transgender Identity*, ed. Dallas Denny (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998): 49.

[17] Kate Bornstein, "Gender Terror, Gender Rage," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006): 243.

[18] Hubbard, "Gender and Genitals," 50.

Within the transgender community (as far as there is a transgender community), it is heavily accepted that their experience can be described as beyond gender. Holly Boswell actually goes so far to say that transcendence of gender *is* transgender:

> The word "transgender" describes much more than crossing between the poles of masculinity and femininity. It more aptly refers to the transgressing of gender norms, or being freely gendered, or transcending gender altogether in order to become more fully human. To deny part of our humanity (the so-called masculine or feminine aspects) is to lock in and shut down a beautiful part of one's true self.[19]

In this definition, transpeople are not the classic image of the transsexual who feels as though s/he is in the wrong body. In support of this, many transpeople feel that the wrong body phenomenon does not describe their experiences. For many, surgery and genital reconstruction, what was often considered proof of the gender binary, is no longer of much importance.[20] These individuals decided that the genitals, which surgeons can only understand as a binary, are of little importance in one's identity. Some pre-op transsexuals are actually quite thankful that they never had surgery; they appreciate being able to call on the traits of either gender whenever they please.[21] In this way, denying the binds of the gender binary leads to a fuller, more representative identity.

Further, transpeople find that language, itself caught in the gender binary, cannot capture their experiences. Transpeople often do not know how to frame their experience in male/female terms. Does being transgender mean to be between the binary, neither male nor female, both male and female? There is not really an accurate answer to these questions.[22] When language is confined to the gender binary, it fails to be useful to transpeople. One transwoman said, "The thing that defeats me is language at the end of the day. There is not a term which

[19] Boswell, "The Transgender Paradigm Shift," 56.
[20] Hubbard, "Gender and Genitals," 51-52.
[21] Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 73-74.
[22] Boswell, "The Transgender Paradigm Shift," 56.

I'm absolutely content and happy with. […] This whole gender issue is a spectrum but there isn't a word which describes that."[23] Language, as it is now, defeats transpeople.

In the face of an often silencing and inadequate binary gender paradigm, one transperson has created her own. Taking the notion of the gender continuum and "[twirling] that line in space, and [spinning] it through several more dimensions,"[24] Kate Bornstein has created gender fluidity. She defines this as "the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules of gender."[25] In this conception, gender is beyond the poles of male and female and far more complex than simply male and female traits, since presumably there are infinitely many genders with their own characteristics. How these genders are articulated does not matter much; it's more important that people realize that there are such options.[26] However, the actual prevalence of such identities is still unclear.

The ambiguous meaning of transgender lends to social problems for transgender individuals. To conflate the beyond-sense of transgender with the across-sense creates a disconnection between transpeople and medical and political practice. As has already been seen, the medical community nearly universally recognizes transpeople in the across-sense of the word. However, transpeople may actually see themselves as beyond gender and regularly call on the traits of both genders. These individuals, should they continue to exhibit both male and female traits, cannot get hormonal medication or surgery. As such, many transpeople must follow a "script" where they claim to feel the wrong body phenomenon.[27] Not only does this reinforce the doctors' notion that a true transperson must feel as though they have the wrong body, but it disservices the individual who must hide their identity from society. Recursively, surgery actually becomes a device for some transpeople to hide their trans identity. Body modification in order to pass acts as security against a

[23] Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 82.

[24] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York and London: Routledge ,1994): 116.

[25] Ibid., 52.

[26] Ibid., 51

[27] Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 62-63.

world hostile to trans identities.[28] If society did not severely discriminate against trans identities, the need for passing, and thus surgery, disappears.[29] Surgery does not reflect transgender in the across-sense; it reflects the prejudices of society. Of course, as seen earlier, surgery can be liberating for many transpeople; surgery is not always an act of hiding.

It has been shown that the argument that sex-reassignment surgery supports the across-sense of transgender becomes questionable in light of the medical process. Further, the assertion that transgender adheres to the binary may originate from the whole of cisgender society and not transpeople, the people who actually identify as the ill-defined term. Judith Butler, building from Foucault's notion that political structures exert power over the populace through mechanization and supervision of the human body, extends this to the gender binary noting that these same structures of power also have interests "in keeping the body bounded and constituted by markers of sex."[30,31] From this perspective, it is society that binds the transgender identity to the binary. Social reactions and laws regarding transgenderism seem to support this. Transpeople operating beyond the binary are "stigmatized, ostracized, and socially delegitimized to the extent that they may fail to be socially recognized."[32] This societal discrimination is even evident in laws meant to grant transpeople rights. In the U.K.'s Gender Recognition Act of 2004, transpeople could receive legal recognition of their new gender. Unfortunately, this recognition is conditioned on the fact that s/he receives reassignment surgery.[33] This law, despite its intention, discriminates against many transpeople who do not want surgery. Further, the law reduces the identities of transpeople who have had surgery but identify as neither male nor female; their identities, rather than being multifaceted, become demarcated solely by their genitals.

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[28] Ibid., 57, 69.

[29] Jagger, *Judith Butler*, 152-153; Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 73.

[30] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978): 139.

[31] Quoted in Jagger, *Judith Butler*, 141.

[32] Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 58.

[33] Jagger, *Judith Butler*, 146.

Linguistic descriptions in support of the across-sense of transgender also become suspicious when considering the deficiencies voiced by transpeople. Regardless of language deficiency, transpeople must still attempt to describe their experience. As such, they must use a language trapped within the binary. This could explain why the terms discussed earlier (e.g. "MtF") seemed to reinforce the across-sense of transgender. There are no commonly accepted terms outside the binary that could better describe their identities. Therefore, transgender as both across and beyond should be commonly acknowledged so that society can make sense of such identities.

The semantic value of transgender will not necessarily remain indefinite. Transgender is a word, and like any other word, it is subject to linguistic change. In fact there is historical precedent for multiple, broader gender terms as well as semantic change. *Gallae*, *hijras*, *mahu*, and *xanith* are all terms used for so-called third sex people in the Roman Empire, India, Polynesia, and the Middle East respectively.[34] English translation must resort to the generic term "third sex" as English lacks a word to capture these people. In English, semantic change is evident through the word "girl," which meant any child in Middle English and not just female children.[35] There is no reason a similar accommodation or change could not eventually occur for transgender.

However, semantic change does not mean that transgender will truly reflect trans identities. Transpeople need a language to describe themselves, a language that society recognizes as well. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, who is often considered the father of modern linguistics, meaning is constructed by the speakers of a language. Meaning shifts only occur when those speakers support the new usage of the term.[36] Thus, society itself must recognize that transgender can mean beyond gender, and not its current common usage in the across-sense. This is not to say that most people need to become transgender themselves. The word "gay,"

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[34] Boswell, "The Transgender Paradigm Shift," 58.

[35] Robert W. Murray, "Historical Linguistics: The Study of Language Change," in *Comtemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*, ed. William O'Grady (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2010): 272.

[36] Eva Waniek and Erik M. Vogt, "Meaning in Gender Theory: Clarifying a Basic Problem From a Linguistic-Philosophical Perspective," *Hypatia* 20, no. 2 (2005), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3811163> (13 February 2012): 59.

for instance, did not mean homosexual until recently, and most people would not identify as gay but still employ the term.[37] It is necessary, however, that transpeople participate in language to redefine the term to better describe their identity.[38] Because the semantic values of words reflect the values of the linguistic society that uses them, transpeople must participate in that society. As the "passing" transperson is not seen as trans in society, participation may require that transpeople refuse to wholly assimilate and assert their identities as neither male nor female.

This solution fails to address that those that identify as transgender hold differing opinions as to what the term really means. As has been seen, transpeople commonly identify with both senses; the across-sense cannot be totally erased, yet the beyond-sense must also proliferate. The pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty presents a possible resolution to this. In *Feminism and Pragmatism*, Rorty argues that women should, rather than attempting to describe their experience through an already existing language, create a logical space, a language, and thus an experience.[39] Through self-invention, groups have "semantic authority over themselves," and eventually this semantic authority intertwines with the language of society as a whole.[40] This pragmatic approach can be extended to any oppressed group, not just women, and therefore is useful for transpeople as well. Through this approach, transpeople create their own language, rather than attempting a description using an inadequate language. The created language should take into account all trans experiences, across or beyond, so theoretically, there would be no disagreement as to whether the language is accurate enough. This act of creation would need to occur outside society so that authority is established by transpeople. Then, this new language will assert itself into society's common language.

The word transgender is not well-defined and generally means either "across the gender binary" or "beyond the gender binary." Often, the former meaning is recognized by cisgender people, the medical community, and by transpeople. The latter meaning is nearly exclusively used by transpeople. Some of these

[37] Murray, "Historical Linguistics," 273.

[38] Waniek, "Meaning in Gender Theory," 63.

[39] Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," (Lecture, The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, University of Michigan, December 7, 1990): 14-15.

[40] Ibid., 31-33.

transpeople argue that society has constructed the notion of transgender in the across-sense, and that transpeople would not identify with this sense if society were more open to gender identities beyond the binary, identities that they inhabit. As it is clear that the across-sense fails to describe the experience of many transpeople, the notion that this is the only correct sense needs to be abandoned; society must recognize that many transpeople do not need to identify with either pole on the binary. To rectify this difference in meaning and place semantic authority with those who identify as transgender, Saussure and Rorty offer two solutions. Saussure's theory of meaning suggests that transpeople need to actively participate in society as transpeople. Rorty's theory asserts that transpeople should, outside this participation, create a language unique to transpeople. As transgenderists and their supporters actively use the word "transgender" to encompass beyond-identities, "transgender," currently used in society's common language as only "across," will eventually replace its discriminatory meaning with something more representative of actual transgender experiences. ❖