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In whose name? A case study of how a small group of gender variant men and women, based in Cape Town, understand and relate to the terms transgender and transsexual.

A dissertation in fulfilment of the requirements for a Masters in Sociology,

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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Chapter 1: Introduction	5
Chapter 2: Literature review	24
Chapter 3: Methods	57
Chapter 4: Exploring respondents' life stories	71
Chapter 5: A rose by any other name? How the men and women of this study understood and related to the terms 'transgender' and 'transsexual'	131
Chapter 6: Concluding remarks: Neither queer nor heterosexually orthodox	164
Reference List	167

Abstract

Using a phenomenological approach and the technique of in-depth interviews, this dissertation investigates how a small sample of gender variant men and women understand, experience, and relate to the terms used to designate them in academic literature and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender/Transsexual (LGBT) activism – namely, ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual.’ The relevance of such an investigation lies in, amongst other things, the fact that the corpus of theory – queer - that is most frequently applied to in order to theorize the lives of such men and women does not pay adequate attention to the empirical data on their lived experiences.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I am "TRANS" only in as much as I have crossed a boundary, but [it is] not who I am...I am also "Appendix", having had mine out, but I sure do not identify as an Appendix

- Rose

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how a small sample of gender variant men and women understand, experience, and relate to the terms used to designate them in academic literature and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender/Transsexual (LGBT) activism – namely, ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual.’ Queer theory has theorised these terms with an inevitably normative load: as categories of identity beyond heteronormative hegemonies. Yet this begs the experiential question of how the categories are lived, and the extent to which they do indeed serve to interpolate transsexual and/or transgendered subjects. My central aim in this dissertation is to pose this experiential question, by way of a small case study. My primary question, therefore, is the extent to which the categories transgender and transsexual, as they are produced in queer theory, resonate with and makes sense of the lived experiences and political struggles of the respondents of this study. Given that a particular experience of sexed and gendered embodiment is central to how ‘transsexual’ and ‘transgender’ people name and identify themselves, my study necessarily includes an exploration of how the respondents in my study experience their bodies.

Such an investigation is of interest for several reasons. Recent work on gender variance suggests that some of the men and women identified by researchers as transgender either do not understand this term in the same way as the researchers applying it to them do, or do not use transgender to refer to themselves (Valentine, 2007: 3). Moreover, some of those designated in this way *do not* aspire to the gender ambiguity suggested by transgender in its queer rendition (Wilson, 2002: 426; Connell, 2010: 9). Indeed, some men and women identified by researchers as transgender reject that identification altogether (see Fassinger, 2007). The practice of subsuming a variety of gender variant people into the category of transgender also risks the erasure of the issues most pertinent to transsexual lives by focusing exclusively on the aspects of those lives that most serve to demonstrate the discursively constructed character of gender (Hines, 2006: 49; Namaste, 2000). Ultimately there are issues to which a focus on the discursive constitution of gender identity cannot speak at all: for example, the vulnerability of working class transsexual women to sex work as a means of employment (Connell, 2012: 871) or the vulnerability of transsexual sex workers to HIV (Namaste, 2009: 13-14).¹

Research of the kind that produces descriptively rich accounts of transsexual subjectivities is also of interest in terms of addressing ethically concerning trends in queer analyses of transsexuality. For instance, the conservative gender politics and false consciousness sometimes ascribed to transsexuals (e.g. Butler, 1993; Hausman, 1995; Salamon, 2004; Wilton, 2000) in terms of how 'they' are thought to conceptualise the relationship of sex, gender, and sexuality to embodiment, inferred from transsexuals' transitions between sexes, is not always borne out by the findings of empirical research

¹ The vulnerability of transsexual women in this regard is the product of the confluence of their transsexuality and their social class.

(see Devor, 1993; Feinbloom et al., 1976; Rubin, 2003). Research has confirmed that an uncomplicatedly heteronormative gender politics does not necessarily follow from the aspiration towards a more stable sexed and gendered embodiment (ibid).

There is an established and rapidly burgeoning feminist and queer theoretical literature that depends upon the example of transgenders, including transsexuals, or “figures for transgender”, to illustrate its arguments (Prosser, 1998: 21; e.g. Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Garber, 1992; Halberstam, 1994, 1998, 2005; Hausman, 1995; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1985, 1990; Kroker & Kroker, 1993; Salamon, 2004, 2006, 2010). However, until recently, little had been written from a queer perspective about transsexuality or transsexuals that tested the epistemological claims of these literatures against empirical data. Indeed, a frequent criticism of queer theorists’ epistemological claims is that they rest too heavily on examinations of film, television, and literary texts (Valocchi, 2005:751), and, in the case of examinations of transsexuality, on second-hand accounts of transsexual lives as represented in film and media commentaries (e.g. Butler, 1993: 84-97; Halberstam, 2005: 76-96). Such studies assume that the existence of heterosexual gender discourses explains subjective experience, begging the question of how the two are related. Case study research indicates that transsexual men and women are active agents, speaking back to and shaping dominant gender discourses as much as they are shaped by them (Rubin, 2003: 17). As I will show in the literature review, some queer analyses either explicitly or implicitly suggest that transsexuals are falsely conscious, beleaguered into surrender to heteronormativity, or complicit in the violence of heteronormativity due to their pursuit of gendered embodiments that depend on conventional heterosexual norms, or, that their subjectivities are exhaustively produced by hegemonic gender discourses. But such claims are

significantly complicated by the empirical evidence, as the findings of this study will show.

In what follows, I elaborate the study's epistemological landscape and rationale by locating the categories of transgender and transsexual in historical context. I then clarify how the terms will be used in this work. I also look at the sociological relevance of studying issues of transgender and transsexuality in the context of contemporary South Africa. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the dissertation.

Transgender and transsexual: an historical overview

The precursors to the contemporary term transgender date back to the 1960s when heterosexual male cross-dressers in the United States began using the terms transgenderal and transgenderist self-referentially (Stryker, 2008b: 146). The popularization of these forms is attributed to the cross-gender identified activist Virginia Prince (Hill, 2007: 176). Prince used transgenderal and transgenderist to differentiate herself and others, whom she referred to as "true transvestites", from transsexuals and homosexuals (Hill, 2007: 58). According to Prince, "true transvestites" were cross-gender identified people who lived in their chosen gender full-time but who did *not*, to use the popular idiom, feel that they had been born in the wrong body, and who therefore did not make recourse to medical interventions to change or modify their bodies. Conversely, transsexuals were cross-gender identified individuals who *did* experience a contradiction between gender and sex and who therefore *did* make use of, or desired to make use of, hormones and surgery to re-establish congruence between gender and sex (ibid).

Prince used these incipient forms of transgender to create a sense of community amongst “true transvestites” (Hill, 2007:18). Transsexuals and homosexuals, however, were excluded. Prince would not, for example, allow “transsexuals and homosexuals into Phi Pi Epsilon (FPE), the membership organization she founded specifically for heterosexual male cross-dressers and their wives” (Hill, 2007: 55). This fact has led scholars such as Robert Hill (2007:4) and David Valentine (2007: 32) to argue that implicit in Prince’s usage of transgenderal/transgenderist was a claim to normality and a bid for mainstream respectability that excluded gender identities more threatening to the status quo. According to Hill (2007: 4),

Prince wanted to socialize individual ‘deviance,’... and normalize it by promoting the radical idea that transvestites were not immoral, sexual deviants but rather normal, respectable citizens with only a harmless gender variation.

Others are more damning of Prince. For example, Susan Stryker (2008a: 55) argues that Prince “took the leading role in driving wedges between transvestite, gay and lesbian, and feminist communities, and she did not envisage an inclusive, expansive, progressive, and multifaceted transgender movement.”

The meaning Prince ascribed to incipient forms of transgender is the antithesis of queer theory’s ascriptions to the term. Although Prince et al and queer theorists both include transvestites in the category of transgender it is clear that Prince did *not* read either transvestites or transgenders as opponents of binary gender. Prince framed transgender as referencing non-subversive though atypical genders, whereas queer theorists would later explicitly frame transgenders and “figures for transgender” as subversive and value them for their potential to trouble heteronormativity at the most fundamental conceptual level (e.g. Case, 1989; Garber, 1992: 16-17; Nestle et al., 2002). Thus a host of characters celebrated for flying in the face of the ‘normal’, such as “drag

kings and queens, transsexuals, cross-dressers, he-shes and she-males, intersexed people, transgenderists, and people of ambiguous, androgynous, or contradictory sex and gender” (Pratt, 1995: 21), were gathered together under the banner of transgender. Before addressing the shift from the interpretation of transgender as a “harmless” (Hill, 2007: 60) form of gender variance to transgender as the subversion of heterosexual gender, a word on the category transsexual is necessary.

Transsexual was coined by David Cauldwell in 1949 to diagnose a female male-identified individual who wrote to him seeking assistance to transition (Prosser, 1998: 9). Cauldwell referred to him as a “psychopathic transsexual” (ibid). A flurry of medical scholarship on transsexuality, pursued by endocrinologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists, followed shortly thereafter, and the idea that transsexuality was a pathology, or, as it is framed in other arguably more sympathetic medical scholarship (see Benjamin, 1966), a condition that can be treated in order to assist transsexuals, stuck. In 1966 the endocrinologist Harry Benjamin published *The Transsexual Phenomenon* establishing the legitimacy, within orthodox medicine, of the idea that transsexuality is a syndrome and developing the early treatment protocols (Connell, forthcoming in *Feminism & Psychology*). This work was followed by equally influential aetiologies from the fields of psychiatry and psychology. For instance, in 1968 the psychiatrist Robert Stoller published *Sex and Gender*, which had a substantial impact on shaping medical consensus regarding transsexuality. As Raewyn Connell (ibid) observes, Stoller took the “blame mother” approach, attributing transsexuality to “the legacy of disturbed mother-child relationships”. Some feminist psycho-analysts and psychiatrists continue to advance versions of the idea that transsexuality is pathological (e.g. Chiland, 2003: 58; Millot, 1991: 25-26). For other feminists, the relationship

between Western medicine, with its links to patriarchal and racist domination (see Lupton, 2012), and transsexuality, left transsexuality and transsexuals irremediably polluted (e.g. Hausman, 1995; Wilton, 2000: 242). In this case, the line of argument was that the naming of transsexuality and related medical practices produced transsexual subjectivities and that, by implication, transsexuals were instruments of patriarchal domination (e.g. Billings & Urban, 1982: 266; Hausman, 1995: 110; Wilton, 2000).

Some feminists are of the view that the diagnosis produced transsexual subjectivities *exhaustively* (e.g. Hausman, 1995: 137-9; Jeffreys, 1990: 188). But such claims are complicated by evidence from the archive of early Western sexology that reveals “transsexual desire [that precedes] its clinical moment of definition”, with case histories as early as 1864 articulating all of the features on which the diagnosis would later be based, such as “the expression of being differently gendered; the recounting of a plot that pulls toward being the other sex; even sometimes the articulated desire to change sex” (Prosser, 1998: 140). In fact, the first transsexual transition took place before the diagnosis was even written (Prosser, 1998: 10). This is not to say that the diagnosis of an individual as transsexual does not have productive power; rather, it is to say that transsexual subjectivities are not exhaustively the product of the diagnosis, and therefore to be feared or dismissed as patriarchal instruments, nor are transsexual men and women the passive surface upon which the diagnosis writes. Indeed, there is evidence that transsexuals have been very active in shaping the diagnosis from the start (Prosser, 1998: 10).

The antecedents of queer theory, in respect of its negative judgment of transsexuals, are interesting. In the 1990s, transgenderal and transgenderist were made-over by “trans activists...as the pangender, umbrella term “transgender” (Hill, 2007: 176; e.g., Feinberg,

1992, 1996). However, in the early days of queer theory and political activism, activists and scholars were still using the term transsexual with politically subversive connotations. The most influential of these thinkers were transsexual activists Kate Bornstein and Sandy Stone. Stone (1991: 295) celebrated transsexual gender for its “complexities and ambiguities” and Bornstein (1994) cast transsexuals, in a book of the same title, in the role of “Gender Outlaws”. Other scholars, already writing explicitly under the aegis of queer theory, used transsexual to similar effect. For instance, as Jay Prosser (1998: 14) points out, the transsexual one encounters in the work of Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (1991), Judith Halberstam (1994), and Riki Anne Wilchins (1997a, 2002) is *not* the transsexual who seeks a new home within the gender binary of man/woman. Rather, this transsexual engages his or her difference in the project of challenging heteronormativity by refusing to pass as either a man or a woman as per heterosexual gender norms. As Prosser (ibid) points out, it was this version of the transsexual that prompted Epstein and Straub (1991: 11) to ask, “What is more postmodern than transsexualism?”, and Halberstam (1994: 212) to flatly declare, “We are all transsexual...there is no ‘other’ side, no ‘opposite’ sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery”. In short, this transsexual was synonymous with the gender-bending transgender later much celebrated and referenced by queer theorists.

However, the gloss on transgender and transsexual with which this dissertation takes issue only began to gain serious traction in the academy when the meaning of transgender and transsexual shifted, and queer renditions of transgender began to be valued and celebrated against queer renditions of transsexual. The net result of this shift was that a newly politicised opposition between transgender and transsexual was established. Transgender came to stand in for subversive gender (politically desirable

according to queer) and transsexual for heterosexually normative gender (politically undesirable) (Elliot, 2009: 6-7; Ekins & King, 1991: 581). Queer theorists invoked transsexuals to illustrate the limits of the subversive potential of transgender, that is, to show that not all 'alternative' gendering is actually subversive or indeed desirable (Prosser, 1998:45). Judith Butler's (1993: 130-139) hugely influential discussion of the male-to-female transsexual prostitute Venus Extravaganza, in which she references Extravaganza as an example of domesticated non-subversive gender variance, is a case in point. Much of this work did not directly judge or devalue transsexual men and women, but in consistently and exclusively valuing only gender-bending transgenders, and using transsexuals, who aspired to a more stable gender identity, as an example of what was *not* transgender it suggested that transsexuals were, at the very least, politically wanting (Elliot, 2009: 6-7).

It is clear, therefore, that the descriptive meanings of the terms transgender and transsexual have shifted significantly in a relatively short space of time, which is itself an interesting phenomenon. The political stakes associated with these changes have been high: the terms are markers of shifting configurations of political allegiances and positionings vis-à-vis the heterosexual mainstream. Currently, to be marked in the queer literature as transsexual is to be positioned as either an ally or a dupe of heteronormativity (see, e.g, Hausman, 1995).

Conceptual clarifications

How then will I be using the terms transsexual and transgender in this dissertation? Firstly, since the men and women who participated in this research did not relate to transsexual or transgender as personal identities, I place these terms in quotation

marks *when using them to refer directly to respondents*. This is intended to indicate and respect the fact that respondents did not identify as transsexual or transgender even if they sometimes made use of the terms self-referentially. I do however hold that the respondents of this study, and others like them, share an experience of gendered embodiment that is phenomenologically different from other experiences of gendered embodiment insofar it is typified by the experience of a contradiction between the body and gender, or what Connell (2009:106) refers to as “contradictory embodiment”. It is therefore necessary to have a term with which to refer to that difference of experience if one is to write about it at all and that term, in this dissertation, is transsexual.

When using the term transsexual, I have in mind Connell’s (2012: 857-8) definition of transsexual women, which I have adapted to include transsexual men:

By 'transsexual women' [or men] I mean women [or men] who have been through a process of transition between locations in the gender order, from an earlier definition as a boy or man [girl or woman] towards the embodiment and social position of a woman [man] - whatever the path taken, and whatever the outcome.

Connell’s definition is useful because it dispenses with the misconception implicitly present in more than one feminist analysis of transsexuality that transition is neatly or necessarily teleological and operates uniformly within the heterosexual gender binary, ending in a ‘full’ transition that entails all of the possible medical interventions to transform the body’s sex according to gender norms that are heteronormative (e.g. Billings & Urban, 1982; Raymond, 1979), whilst simultaneously acknowledging that such transitions *do* operate within a binary frame.

As Connell (2012: 585) and Wilson (2002: 426) have both pointed out, and this is pertinent given the manner in which this study's respondents used 'transsexual', transsexual may effectively function as an adjective that describes one's current location as opposed to a noun that names one's identity; it may describe a period or phase in the lived experience of a transsexual man or woman in which he or she does not yet pass. In other words, his or her appearance still reveals a history of being embodied as the sex with which he or she does not wish to be identified by others. Thus, when referring to my respondents as transsexual, I treat transsexual as a phenomenological term describing a particular experience of oneself in relation to the social world that is hoped to be temporary.

What of transgender? Most respondents used this term as synonymous with transsexual; only one respondent used transgender to describe a politics, and that politics was fundamentally different from the one suggested by academic queer theory. I therefore do not use transgender to refer to participants or their experience. I do not deny, however, that for some it is a category that names identity and personal experience and thus can be used phenomenologically. With reference to my respondents, however, a phenomenological use of transgender – if defined queerly – is not appropriate.

The critique of Queer theory

The dissertation will show that the accuracy of queer theorizations of transsexuality is significantly complicated, *though not therefore completely invalidated*, by the lived experience of those designated transgender or transsexual. My research treats a sense of self as a practice embedded in particular places and times – therefore necessarily the

focus of a close phenomenological account. My reference to practice relates to the question of the relationship between structure and agency and draws on the work of scholars such as Sherry Ortner. Ortner (1984: 184) describes theory seeking to explain the "relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we call 'the system' on the other" as practice theory. When I refer to practice here and to transsexual peoples' gendered sense of self as a practice I am indicating that I see their sense of self not as mechanically or exhaustively produced by a *single* social structure 'out there', such as heteronormativity, but rather as arising out of how they respond to and make use of the multiple structures, and the tools such structures bequeaths them, in which they are all differently embedded. In her work on transsexuality, Connell (2009, 2010, 2012) has consistently insisted on looking at the 'origins' of the gender practice of transsexual women in multiple structural planes – the economic, the bio-medical, the historical, the patriarchal etc. – showing that transsexual women – and there is no reason not to assume that this is equally true of transsexual men – are shaped *and shape* structures including and beyond the heteronormative. In other words, transsexual people exercise agency within structures as much as they are agents of the norms of those structures. Queer theory tends to treat transsexuals as a product of a problematic patriarchal gender structure paying little regard to personal agency and almost no regard to structures other than patriarchy and heteronormativity. I argue, however, that it is only in the details and contextual locations of the lives of transsexual people that an accurate appraisal of specific examples of gender transitioning and the ethics thereof emerges.

Queer theory has been criticized for collapsing the distinction between sex and gender and arguing that sex is not a biological substrate on top of which gender is constructed

but rather that sex is *as* constructed as gender, indeed, that sex *is* gender by another name (Butler, 2006[1990]: 8-10). Whilst in the abstract the argument that sex itself is gendered is convincing, it is not a description of sex that does justice to the lived experience of many transsexual people. For example, it is commonplace in the autobiographical accounts of transsexual men and women to encounter descriptions of embodiment replete with references to being born in or trapped in the wrong body where sex and gender are experienced as at odds or out of harmony with one another (e.g. Cummings, 1992; Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009; Morris, 1986). Moreover, many first-person accounts of transsexual embodiment assert the psychological necessity of bringing sexed embodiment back into some kind of alignment with gender identity in order for the transsexual person to experience a measure of wellbeing (see Johnson, 2007; Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009; Rubin, 2003). And, as gender becomes more and more detached from dress and self-presentation in many contemporary societies, unambiguous sexed embodiment becomes more and more important to those, such as transsexual men and women, whose bodies consistently betray their gender identities (Rubin, 2003: 11).

Queer is also criticised for its narrow focus. The majority of queer transgender scholarship has explored questions of identity and embodiment in distinctly theoretical domains without much attention to the specific lived social contexts in which genders take shape (e.g. Butler, 1993, 2004; Halberstam, 1994, 1998, 2005; Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1990; Salamon, 2010). This study contributes to countering that trend by adding to a growing body of empirical and phenomenological work on transsexuality located in parts of the world very different from the United States (e.g. Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009; Najmabadi, 2008; Reddy, 2006; Solymár & Takács, 2007; Winter,

2006; Vincent & Camminga, 2009). It also forms part of on-going efforts to challenge orthodoxies in queer and feminist theory vis-à-vis the politics of transsexuality versus those of transgender à la queer (e.g. Connell, 2010, 2012; Namaste, 2000, 2009; Rubin, 2003). Finally, it challenges the arbitrary privileging of Northern perspectives in queer transgender studies.

Contemporary queer literature *does* distinguish between transsexuals and transgenders, often suggesting that the choices transsexuals make are ethically concerning. For example, some queer literature on transsexuality treats people who transition from one sex to another as complicit in the maintenance of oppressive gender norms, sometimes describing transsexuality as a form of false consciousness or even witting political treachery (Roen, 2002: 305). Alternately, queer theorists fetishize transsexuals and/or transsexuality as politically radical (e.g. Epstein & Straub, 1991: 11; Halberstam, 1994: 212), with little heed, it seems, to how transsexuals see their own transitions.

Finally, the argument that prescriptive queer theoretical renditions of transsexuality do not speak to the lived experience of many transsexual men and women, is confirmed by the contrast between queer theoretical accounts and the autobiographical accounts of transsexual people (e.g. Griggs, 1996; Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009; Serano, 2007), as well as an expanding body of empirical, phenomenological, and ethnographic research on the topic (e.g. Bolin, 1988; Connell, 2010; Feinbloom et al, 1976; Griggs, 1998; Johnson, 2007). This makes my research relevant as a contribution to a small but growing body of work that counters the trends in queer and feminist scholarship described above.

Why study 'transgender' in South Africa?

Having established itself in North America, queer transgender studies and politics migrated across the border to Canada where queer and its rendition of transgender encountered resistance and sometimes outright rejection by transsexual activists and intellectuals (e.g. Mirha Soleil Ross, Diane Gobeil, and Viviane Namaste; see Namaste, 2000, 2005). Queer theory and transgender studies also travelled to the global South. This migration exposed then dominant deployments of transgender to challenge and reinterpretation; either by design or simply because of the content that new perspectives unearthed and the research directions scholars began to encourage (see Namaste, 2000; Solymár & Takács, 2007; Spurlin, 2006; Tucker, 2009; Wilson, 2002). Implicit in the logic of the phenomenological case that I am making is that history and geography matter, and their imprints will be evident in the manner of peoples' identifications and politics. It is interesting and important, then, to take the question of conceptual meaning into a Southern location – with cultural, political and economic contexts different from those of the North.

The transition to democracy has delivered South Africans one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, including in matters of sex and gender. The 1996 Bill of Rights, in affirming the right to freedom of expression, made sexual preference “a matter of right” (Posel, 2004: 55). The Bill of Rights also paved the way for other radical changes such as the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006, which made same-sex marriage legal. South Africa is now one of only five countries in the world, and the only country on the African continent, to extend the right to marry to same-sex couples (Tucker, 2009: 1). As a consequence of its progressive constitution, South Africa has become one of the

more globally visible sites of gay, lesbian, and more recently, transgender politics and activism, in Africa (Thoreson, 2008: 679).

However, despite South Africa's progressive constitution and the new modes of gender radicalism it enables, the South African citizenry remains, on the whole, deeply conservative (see Posel, 2004; Thoreson, 2008). Moreover, many of those who are now liberated adults grew up in the sexually and politically authoritarian regime of apartheid, which infiltrated their early experiences of their bodies and emergent sexual identities (see Posel, 2004). Although sexual and gender diversity is actually visible and constitutionally protected here, it is still difficult and even dangerous to live beyond heterosexual norms (see Distiller, 2011; Davidson Ladly, 2012; Matebeni, 2011; Mbugua, 2011; Steyn & van Zyl, 2009; Theron, 2009; Tucker, 2009; Vincent & Camminga, 2009). The vast majority of South Africans, for instance, are still deeply opposed to the legal and social recognition of the rights of transgender and transsexual people (Thoreson, 2008: 680).

This opposition has serious consequences given that occupying an identity as either male or female is an implicit *social* condition of citizenship which in turn affects access to legal citizenship, without which identification, social security, and access to rights, becomes difficult, dangerous, and in some cases impossible. For instance, although the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act 49 of 2003 provides for the re-description of a person's gender *without* their having to undergo genital surgery, there is mounting anecdotal evidence that officials at the department of home affairs, because of their own conservative norms, do not comply with the Act. Davidson Ladly (2012: 8) notes that,

... While Act 49 was passed in 2003, in 2006 there remain problems as to its implementation. Gender DynamiX has received numerous complaints from individuals who, while in full compliance with the requirements of the Act, are still denied the alternation of their sex descriptions. Gender DynamiX has offered educational sessions on transgender issues to the Department of Home Affairs in an effort to combat the ignorance and prejudice which it believes is at the heart of the Ministry's failure to properly serve those seeking alteration of their sex descriptions. Gender DynamiX has also taken the complaints to the South African High Court, where it is expecting a favourable ruling.

The specific locus of my study is Cape Town. Amongst South African cities, Cape Town in particular is known as more open than most to the performance of hybrid sexualities. For instance, despite the intolerance of the average citizen to gender variance (Thoreson, 2008: 680), *mainstream* gay and lesbian culture in Cape Town acts as a draw card for the city in attracting tourists ("Cape Town in the pink with gay tourists", 2012) and, more significantly, there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that African nationals made unsafe in their own countries by their transsexuality, transgenderism, or homosexuality, flock to Cape Town seeking refuge (e.g. Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009:211-216). Most significantly, Cape Town is home to the continent's first activist NGO, Gender DynamiX, exclusively concerned with the needs of transsexual and transgender people (see <http://www.genderdynamix.org.za>). A number of visible transgender rights activists such as the photographers Zanele Muholi and Robert Hamblin, and GDX's founding director Liesl Theron, call Cape Town home. In fact, many of the respondents in this study are drawn from the ranks of transgender activists; an irony given that few identify personally as transgender or transsexual or wish to be identified as such by others.

It is Cape Town's centrality as the site of such activism that defines its interest as the locus of my case study. My respondents, however, are not – and are not presented as – representative or 'typical' of gender variant people living in Cape Town. The sample consists of white, coloured, and black South Africans ranging in age from their 20s to their late 60s, all of whom are situated somewhere within the middle class. However, having had, in the main, a close and formative association with one or other activist organisation, they are well versed in the questions of identity and politics that I have raised in my research, and have been perhaps unusually reflexive and articulate respondents as a result. It should be added, too, that the lens that this case study holds to the city of Cape Town is not to the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable inhabitants, nor to those whose gender variance has subjected them to communal violence or vengeance – as has sometimes erupted in this divided and fractious city, often in the case of people from other parts of the continent (Harris, 2002: 181), but also in the case of gender variant people such as butch lesbians who suffer the on-going scourge of 'corrective' rape (Muholi, 2004; Nel & Judge, 2008).

Overview of the chapters

The task of chapter 2 is to survey the contributions to studies of transgender and transsexuality made by the relevant theorists and critics, to assess the state of the field of transgender studies in South Africa, and to situate the dissertation in relation to this work.

In chapter 3 I set out the study's methodology. I address the rationale behind selecting a purposive sample, the choice of semi-structured life-history interviews as a method of gathering data, thematic content analysis as a method of interpretation, and the

argument for locating the study within the qualitative paradigm and interpreting the results from a phenomenological view point. I also consider the implications of the fact that most of the study's respondents have been or are currently involved in transgender rights activism. I locate the respondents in terms of other social positionings I consider to be relevant, such as age, class, and race, and reflect on the implications of these for study's findings. I then reflect on the ethical issues raised by the project as well as the limitations of the research.

Chapter 4 is the first of two substantive chapters. It introduces the men and women who participated in the study in terms of their life stories, *before* addressing questions about their identity, so as to make some biographical sense of their relationship to the concepts of transgender and transsexual. The chapter also examines respondents' experiences of embodiment through personal, partner, and peer responses to their bodies. It locates them as social beings in terms of their class, race, and culture and the effects of these on their experiences of embodiment and gender.

In chapter 5, I move on to look specifically at how my respondents understood and related to the terms transgender and transsexual. None of the people with whom I have engaged in the course of this research (approximately 20 people, 6 of whom participated directly in this study) use the terms transgender or transsexual as markers of personal gender identity; all see themselves as men or women and prefer others to identify them as such *without* qualification. The implications of this finding, which is the most important of the research, are discussed in this chapter. I also look at the limited applicability of queer theory with respects to its usefulness in theorizing the experiences of these respondents.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with reflections on the key findings and their relevance to the research question.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter surveys the contributions made by radical and queer feminists to the theorization of transgender and transsexuality, the recent critiques of queer theory, and the state of the field of transgender studies in South Africa. Part 1 considers early radical feminist responses to transsexuality and feminist ethnomethodological studies. The on-going relevance of these contributions is reflected by the bent of some contemporary feminist research on transsexuality as well as movement-politics around the issue of whether transsexuals (particular women) ought to be included in feminist struggles (Gamson, 1997: 188; Koyama, 2000:4). In part 2, I turn my attention to queer feminist theorizations of transgender and transsexuality, with a specific focus on the

work of Judith Butler. The relevance of this body of work in relation to scholarship on and activism around transsexuality cannot be overstated, given that queer theory is now so well established in academic institutions in the global north that hardly a perspective on gender or sexuality emerges that is not queer (Halperin, 2003: 340-1). In part 3, I look at current empirical and theoretical work on transsexuality that is critical of queer approaches. I conclude, in part 4, with a review of the South African scholarship on issues of transgender, arguing that there is room and need within this scholarship for work that addresses the questions I explore in this research.

Part 1: Anglo-American feminisms and transsexuals

Radical lesbian feminism and transsexual women

The question of what transsexuality means politically has been under negotiation amongst feminists since the 1960s (Connell, 2012: 859). For instance, in 1973 radical lesbian feminist Robin Morgan publically accused Beth Elliot, a transsexual musician who was hired to perform at a feminist conference, of being “an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer—with the mentality of a rapist” (Morgan cited Bettcher, 2009: n.p.). Feminist theologian Mary Daly (1978: 71) weighed in describing transsexual women as “necrophiliac[s]” who invaded women’s bodies. And, in her highly influential monograph *The Transsexual Empire*, Janice Raymond (2006 [1979]: 134) reiterated Morgan’s and Daly’s claims. To appreciate the extent of the heat surrounding debates about the inclusion of transsexual women in feminism, a concrete example is useful. In the late 1970s, Olivia Records, an explicitly feminist company, was pressured by members of the women’s movement to fire a transsexual sound-engineer whom they had hired. When Olivia refused, their decision was met with a volley of “hate

mail, threats of assault, and death threats”, by self-identified feminists, which “intensified after the publication of Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*, in which the author singled out the sound-engineer, Sandy Stone, as an example of why male-to-female (MtF) transsexuals were dangerous interlopers in lesbian feminists circles (Koyama, 2000: 4). The proof, Raymond (2006 [1979]: 133) argued, was in Stone’s “masculinist behaviour”, which was “notably obtrusive” and exemplified by Stone’s “crucial” and “very dominant role there [at Olivia]”.

Raymond – whose work constitutes the first formal theorization of transsexuality to emerge from Anglo-American feminism – made the argument that the transsexual desire to transition was motivated by a patriarchal drive to dominate women and facilitated by a conspiracy of patriarchs (the medical professionals who assisted transsexuals), intended to conform to – rather than challenge – “the role and behaviour of stereotyped femininity” (Raymond, 2006 [1979]: 132). Raymond read transsexual women as reflecting the gender essentialism held to be both the foundation of patriarchal oppression and to serve in its on-going legitimation (Heyes, 2003: 1101). Thus, transsexual women did not, according to Raymond, have a legitimate claim to the categories woman or lesbian. Raymond’s (2006 [1979]: 139) own argument was biologically essentialist: “[We] know who *we* are”, she wrote, “We know we are women who are born with female chromosomes and anatomy” (emphasis in the original). Ironically, this argument reproduces the logic of the claim to the exclusive naturalness of heterosexuality that lesbian feminists have so strongly rebutted elsewhere (e.g. Rich, 1980). Contradictorily, Raymond also claimed that women are women by virtue of the lived experience of patriarchal oppression that they share, which Raymond denied transsexual women.

There are obvious deficiencies in Raymond's arguments. Firstly, Raymond addressed transsexuality as though it were a monolithic entity with no consideration of how this might affect the veracity of her generalizations (Heyes, 2003: 1101). Secondly, Raymond's study lacked empirical rigour, based as it was on second-hand accounts of the lives of a handful of high-profile transsexual women. Empirical research has been shown to unsettle formulaic convictions about transsexuals and, had Raymond's study included a well-designed empirical component, she might have found that many transsexual women *do* in fact have intimate knowledge of the violence that attends patriarchy and "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980) together with many other experiences that typify the lives of women within a given culture (see Namaste, 2000) and of the daily discrimination to which women continue to be subject in the workplace and the home, amongst other milieus. To take one example, in transitioning transsexual women expose themselves to all the usual workplace discrimination that non-transsexual women tend to experience, such as a drop in salary and respect from their colleagues (Schilt & Wiswall, 2008: 1-2).

In the aggregate then, radical feminist responses to transsexual women were not a tribute to feminism. There were, of course, some non-transsexual feminists, even if they were few in number, who opposed the position articulated by Raymond et al (Meyerowitz, 2002: 259-60). And, from the start, transsexual women themselves did not acquiesce passively; they wrote back to their detractors (e.g. Carol Riddell, 2006 [1980]; Sandy Stone, 1991). Yet the work of Raymond and others did gain traction, and continues to command respect from some feminists even today.

Radical lesbian feminism and transsexual men

Prior to the 1970s the gender roles of butch and femme had “provided structure to particular lesbian worlds” (Rubin, 2003: 66). However, radical lesbian feminism rejected the roles of butch and femme on the basis that they replicated those ascribed to men and women by the heterosexual mainstream (ibid).

The distaste of radical lesbian feminism towards female-masculinity and FtM transsexuality has a relationship to the homophobia that characterised Anglo-American feminism of the 1950s and 60s. For instance, Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and a highly influential figure in movement feminism of the time, referred to lesbians involved in organised feminism as the “lavender menace” or the “lavender herring” (Gilmore & Kaminski, 2007: 96; Rubin, 2003: 67). And her attitude was not uncommon. *Putatively* this homophobia was a response to the efforts of the mainstream press to undermine feminists by suggesting that their critique of patriarchy amounted to nothing more than the bitterness of “a bunch of lesbians” (Atkinson cited in Rubin, 2003: 67); however, it would be mistaken to suggest that Friedan and others simply caved in to media pressure. Friedan was well-known for her antipathy towards lesbian women and she was not alone in expressing such sentiments (see Rubin, 2003:67).

Lesbian feminists responded to this homophobia by, amongst other things, redefining what it meant to be a lesbian, referring to themselves as women-identified-women (Rubin, 2003: 70). The implication was that being a lesbian reflected an especially politicized feminist consciousness, a level above that of the heterosexual woman. Woodul (cited in Rubin, 2003: 70) explains how the term women-identified-women helped to secure inclusion for lesbians in the women’s movement:

We were trying to figure out how to tell women about lesbianism without using the word lesbian, because *we found that at these conferences we kept freaking people out all the time...* So what we were trying to do was make women realize that *lesbians were not so different from other women in any sort of strange way* (my emphasis).

This re-scripting of lesbianism entailed the embrace of an essentialist version of the category woman that would come to function as the rationale for a great deal of transphobia and exclusion of transsexual women from movement feminism and lesbian communities in general (see Gamson, 1997: 179; Coogan, 2006: 19).

The sentiment that transsexual men and women are not 'real' men or women, and that transsexuals psychotically or duplicitously refuse to recognize who they *really* are, or that they are falsely consciousness, continues to find expression in the attitudes and writing of a number of influential contemporary feminists. These include Sheila Jeffreys (1990: 188), according to whom transsexualism is unimaginable in a post-patriarchy, Bernice Hausman (1995: 140) who sees transsexuals as gender's dupes, Collette Chiland (2003: 81) and Catherine Millot (1991: 25, 26, 41) who argue that transsexuals are psychotic, Claudia Card (1990: xv), who approvingly describes Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* as "the most powerful treatise on the ethics and politics of male-to-constructed female transsexualism", and Elizabeth Grosz (1994: 207) who argues that transsexual women, whom she sees as men, labour under the illusion that they are women. And this list is hardly an exhaustive one.

Feminist ethnomethodology and transsexual women

As a variant of phenomenological research, ethnomethodology holds a lens to the "presuppositions of everyday social categories" (Connell, 2012: 860), to discern their

underlying logics and purpose. Especially revealing, are cases where social actors get things 'wrong', or 'right' but under atypical circumstances, thereby demonstrating the constructedness of such categories and the terms thereof (ibid). So, for instance, the very conscious work that male-to-female (MtF) and female-to-male (FtM) transsexual people are argued to put into passing as women and men, and the painstaking work – frequently ignored by researchers – that they often put into passing as the boys or girls they were supposed to be as children, sheds some light on what the gender norms of their social contexts are. Such work has its roots in Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology.

In 1967 Garfinkel produced a case-study that centred on an MtF transsexual named "Agnes" who "appeared at the Department of Psychiatry at U.C.L.A in October 1958" and reported that she had automatically started feminizing at puberty (Garfinkel, 2006 [1967]: 60). In a gutsy act of agency, Agnes had begun taking her mother's birth-control pills at the start of puberty, hence her 'automatic' feminization. She requested medical assistance to complete what she framed as a natural, if unusual, process (ibid). She was then treated and analysed by a host of specialists including psychiatrists, surgeons, endocrinologists, and sociologists for a gender identity disorder – an irony in light of the fact that her gender identity was anything but disordered; she saw herself quite clearly as a woman (Connell, 2009: 105).

Agnes's case was to ethnomethodology and transsexual medicine as the case of the Wolf Man had been to Freud (Connell, 2009: 105-6). But, as Connell (ibid) notes, the Wolf Man "had to support the work of only one theorist [...] Agnes has supported no less than four important theoretical works [...] across three disciplines". For instance, for social researchers and theorists of gender such as Susan J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna

(1978) and Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), Agnes made visible that gender was established and maintained through social practices regulated by norms. Moreover, Agnes's case made it clear that we are held *socially accountable* when we diverge from the relevant gender norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 135). As West and Zimmerman (1987: 126; my emphasis) put it, the purpose of their work, to which Agnes was crucial, was

[T]o propose an ethnomethodologically informed, and therefore distinctively sociological, understanding of gender as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment. We contend that *the "doing" of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production*. Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures".

Writing on these approaches, in relation to West and Zimmerman's paper, Connell (2009: 106) observes that though this work has value it is preoccupied with the dimension of transsexual men and women's lives that concerns passing as their 'chosen' gender. There are a number of problems with this. Firstly, researchers miss the fact that transsexual men and women may put as much effort at certain points in their biographies into passing as the gender that they are supposed to be, as they do into passing as their 'chosen' genders. This suggests that the "central task" for transsexual people is not that of passing as the opposite gender but rather that of passing as the gender they required to be by others (Connell, 2009: 106-7). Secondly, it "occludes important issues of contradictory embodiment" (Connell, 2009: 106) that, in the aggregate, typify the experiences of transsexual men and women. Such research also tends to neglect the daily and unglamorous hardships, and in many accounts, the

agonies (see Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009), that living the experience of contradictory embodiment entails: the breakdown of familial relationships, the endangerment of job security, health, vulnerability to HIV, personal safety, sexual pleasure, socio-economic security, and legal personhood. And such hardships shed light on other social structures such as class, age, race, and citizenship that are equally relevant to the production, experience, and embodiment of gender.

Evidence that gender was a social accomplishment had important implications for how feminists would interpret transsexual lives in what was to follow, because it was now possible to reason that, given that gender was normative and that the hegemonic norms were groundlessly prejudicial to some – e.g. gays, lesbians, and gender ambiguous people – social actors had a moral responsibility to make choices that resisted oppressive gender norms. Kessler and McKenna (1978: 120) speculated that in a society in which the inherent fluidity of gender was allowed, transsexuals would cease to exist altogether: women could have penises and men could have vaginas.

The approaches to, and interpretations of, transsexuality and transsexual people that emerged from radical feminism and feminist ethnomethodology are remarkably different in the methods they pursued and the conclusions they reached. Yet they share one important feature: the voices of transsexual people are, to *varying* extents, absent in both. For example, although Agnes's voice was present in the ethnomethodological accounts insofar as they consider what she said, such accounts did not take *her* interpretation of her experience particularly seriously. Thus, this literature often spoke about its own version of the transsexual person without paying significant attention to the transsexual person's version of him or herself.

Part 2: Queer theory

This section of the review establishes and argues for *my* reading of queer theory and sets out the extent of my critique; it also shows how queer theory's account of sex, gender, and sexuality is different from standard sociological accounts and how these differences are relevant to the theorization and political analysis of transsexuality. Although I argue that queer theory, as Connell (2010: 9) puts it, ultimately "get[s] no grip" on transsexual subjectivities, I *do* acknowledge the usefulness of queer to theorizing certain aspects of the social workings of gender that are pertinent both to non-transsexual and transsexual people. Given that I have already engaged in a critique of the analytical adequacy of queer's use of the category transgender in research and in activism in the introduction (see pg.15-18), I focus here primarily on critiquing queer's normative claims and the description of transsexual subjectivities upon which those claims are based. Because of the scope and complexity of the queer literature, it is necessary to stress that the exposition I present here represents *one* possible interpretation of queer theory, my interpretation, and its implications for theorizing transsexuality.

What is Queer theory?

The field of queer theory is rapidly expanding and enormously influential, already particularly well entrenched in institutions across the United States (Namaste, 2000: 9; Halperin, 2003: 340). To delimit it, I have concentrated on the work of the most influential scholar, Judith Butler; though not to the exclusion of others. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Butler's theorization of sex, gender, and desire, and of the relationship between them, undergirds *most* queer and/or poststructuralist analyses of

the relationship of the body to gender and the politics thereof (e.g., Salamon, 2004, 2006, 2010; Halberstam, 1994, 1998, 2005; Wilchins, 1997a, 2002; Nestle et al., 2002; Garber, 1992; Hausman, 1995; Hird, 2002). As queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993: 1) notes, the awesome impact of Butler's just-published monograph *Gender Trouble* was illustrated at the 1990's Rutgers conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies, where there was hardly a submission that did not appeal to Butler's authority to support its arguments (also cited in Prosser, 1998:24). Thus, it is Butler's work to which I pay the most attention.

Just two decades old, queer theory is still characterised by flux, instability, and lower levels of consensus as to what it is or ought to be, what its procedures are, and what its proper objects are, if indeed it ought to have any (see Butler, 1994), than more established bodies of theory (Halperin, 2003: 340). One might argue that this instability and resistance to defining queer is the point, because at the heart of all queer theory lie claims about the inherent instability of gender categories and the violence of trying to stabilize them (Morland & Willox, 2005: 4). However, despite the fact that academics who write on queer cannot always agree about what queer theory refers to (Matebeni, 2011:43; Morland & Willox, 2005:1-5), much of what is written under the aegis of queer nevertheless shares certain family resemblances. The most important of these resemblances is the extent to which sex, gender, and sexuality are seen by queer theorists as distinct categories related only insofar as one's occupation of a particular sex is *normatively* assumed to correlate with a particular gender and that gender with a particular sexual orientation. In other words, for queer theory, both the distinction between sex and gender and the relations between particular sexes, genders, and sexualities, are *only* normative ones, hence the charge that queer theory collapses what

is for some, including the transsexual men and women of this sample, an experiential distinction and an experiential relatedness (Rubin, 2003:18-19). This conception of sex, gender, and sexuality is not just an analytical claim made by queer theorists but is also punted as a normative ideal, as I show below.

Annemarie Jagose (1996, n.p.) describes queer theory as

...those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire...Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, [queer theory] calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'.

The difference, then, between queer theory and more traditional sociological accounts of sex, gender, and sexuality, is that the latter have tended to conceive of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality “as separate variables...defined in binary terms” (Valocchi, 2005: 752). According to such models, “Bodies are either male or female; our gender presentation, behavioural dispositions, and social roles are either masculine or feminine; our sexuality is either heterosexual or homosexual” (ibid). So, in queer theory, the relationship of, for example, female anatomy and biology to feminine gender and then of feminine gender to heterosexuality, is treated as normative (heterosexually so), not given, whereas a more conventional approach might also see these categories as distinct but their relationship to one another as necessary and set. A concrete example of the logic that sex, gender and sexuality are binary and that if one is, say, a male, one will also be masculine and a heterosexual, is provided by Louise Vincent and Bianca Camminga in their recent work on transsexuality in the South African context. The authors describe how, during apartheid, male conscripts could gain access to gender reassignment surgery, indeed were often coerced to, if they were gay. The logic was that “a man who desired men was [...] a woman and surgery provided the physical means to

create this desired fit [between anatomy and sexuality](Vincent & Camminga, 2009:686). Queer is indeed powerful as a means of theorizing such examples.

It is Judith Butler's work that has contributed most significantly to queer and feminist theorization of transsexual and transgender people (Connell, 2012: 861; Johnson, 2005:36; Prosser, 1998: 24). Butler accomplished four things which are particularly relevant in this regard. First, she did away with the idea that women are the proper subject of feminist representation, and in so doing, she did away with the idea that there is any objective definition of the category woman and rendered claims to essential gender identities – of the type that a transsexual person might make – a priori politically suspect. Second, she convincingly theorized gender as performative, rendering claims to essential or 'real' gender philosophically naïve and politically reactionary. Third, she collapsed the distinction between sex and gender, arguing that sex *was* gender (i.e. was as constructed as gender and reflected gender norms) and was maintained through a similarly performative process to gender; this meant that claims to a 'real' body were rendered as problematic as claims to a 'real' or essential gender. Fourth, she "yoked" transgender to the celebrated queer practice of subverting heterosexually normative gender and she yoked transsexual to heterosexual gender normativity (Prosser, 1988:24), which cemented the embattled position of transsexual people in relation to queer theory and activism. In what follows I elaborate Butler's theoretical accomplishments and further examine their consequences for theorizing transsexual subjectivities.

Butler began *Gender Trouble* (1990) with the argument that women are not the subject of feminist representation in any straightforward way because, as she demonstrated,

'woman' is a category that works to produce what it purports only to name. Building on Foucault's analysis of power as productive and not merely prohibitive, Butler (2006 [1990]: 1-46) argues that the category woman is problematic if treated as self-evident. The argument is that political and linguistic representation is extended to a subject, in this case to a woman, only if she meets certain value-laden criteria that are set out in advance (Butler, 2006 [1990]: 2) and that these criteria incentivize and normalize heterosexual expressions of gender and sexuality.

Butler substantiated the argument that the category woman is productive of those it names by means of a genealogy of the term woman in Anglo-American feminisms. An examination of how Anglo-American feminisms have used the category woman reveals, for instance, that the early suffragettes pursued the franchise for women but often only with white women in mind (Bhavnani & Coulson, 1986: 82), while Betty Friedan's influential work in the 1950s assumed a white middle class heterosexual woman as its subject (Gilmore & Kaminski, 2007), and some 1970s radical lesbian feminism only extended representation to lesbian women assumed to be biologically female (e.g. Raymond, 1979). Butler showed that we cannot simply assume that feminism represents women's interests in a neutral way (it represents the interests of particular sets of women derived from particular renditions of what a woman is); nor does it simply correspond linguistically to some pre-existing entity in the world (Lloyd, 2007: 26). Political struggles therefore cannot simply attack patriarchy; they must engage critically with the discursive dimension of the category of person they seek to represent in the first place. In other words, such struggles must be as much concerned with the norms of social recognition as they are with what happens to people once they are recognized as any particular social category (Butler, 2004:2-4). Because transsexual

men and women often assert an experiential link between being men and women and having a particular kind of body (e.g. men having penises and women vaginas) or behaving in particular ways, they have been treated by some queer theorists and feminists with suspicion and hostility. But this begs the question of whether an aspiration to a conventional embodiment necessarily yokes those who have such aspirations to the violence of institutionalised and normalized heterosexuality. Transsexual men and women, as recent empirical research suggests (see Connell, 2010; Rubin, 2003), have complex politics characterised by contradictions and running the gamut from reactionary to feminist and everything in between (Connell, 2010: 17).

Butler's second accomplishment was to show that the stability or naturalness of certain genders is in fact the work of a constant and socially *compelled* recitation of heterosexual gender norms. For Butler (2006 [1990]:25) gender can be described as performative because gender norms must be incessantly reiterated, re-performed, to achieve the *impression* of stability and "givenness". In *Gender Trouble* Butler described this phenomenon as gender performativity. She noted that it was precisely because the norms depended on an embodied practice of recitation that they were vulnerable to subversion (Butler, 2006 [1990]: 199). By far the most powerful example that Butler mobilized in order to illustrate the performative nature of gender was the transvestite drag ball, which, then and now, is treated by queer theory as an example of transgender. What made drag a valuable example of performativity is that "drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler, 2006 [1990]: 187). Butler (*ibid*) continues,

If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance

suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance...*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency* (emphasis in the original).

So, from the inception of queer theory, transgender and gender subversion (which is valued in queer) were “yoked” to one another (Prosser, 1998:21-3). As a description of how gender works, the notion of performativity does not necessarily pose problems to transsexuals. However, if the description is then interpreted as an ideal – that gender is performative and that we therefore ought to do our gender in evidently performative ways – then transsexual men and women are automatically a problem for queer theory and certain variants of feminism, or, rather, queer theory and particular variants of feminism are automatically a problem for transsexual people. This is because transsexual men and women, by and large, aspire to versions of gender that are not evidently unstable (see Wilson, 2002; Rubin, 2003; Prosser, 1998).

The argument that gender is performative ought not to be misread as the argument that the way we do our gender is free or voluntary. To show how this is not the case, Butler applied to J.L Austin’s speech act theory. A performative speech act is one that brings about what it names (Butler, 1993: 224). The most common example of such an utterance would be the point in a heterosexual marriage ceremony where the presiding official says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife”. Pronouncing two people husband and wife is a doing of the marriage, not a mere description of one. Butler extends this to gendering. According to Butler’s (1993:232) argument, the declaration of the doctor or the midwife, “It’s a boy/girl” is equally the start of a doing of gender more than it is a description of gender. This is because naming the gender of the infant enjoins the infant so named to adequately embody the norms that govern “girlness” or “boyness” in her/his culture. Embodying such norms is, to an extent, non-negotiable

given that an identity as a gender – in a heteronormative society as *either* a man *or* a woman – is a precondition of citizenship without which one cannot be a person in the law and upon which judgements of shared humanity depend (Butler, 2004: 12-13). Such non-negotiability is further evidenced by the savageness with which the gender binary is defended in acts of violence against gender variant people (Butler, 2004: 35). Thus, the girl *must* perform her “girlness” in accordance with the norms of her social context or face the social music. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest, for instance, that in the case of the ‘corrective’ rape of lesbian women in South Africa, what is being ‘corrected’ is not homosexuality so much as butchness (i.e. daring to gender masculine when one is ‘really’ a woman), for the lesbian women who are raped ‘correctively’ have tended, according to activists at the coalface, to be butch. .

In *Bodies that Matter* Butler also clarified the argument made in *Gender Trouble* that transgender subverted heteronormative gender, using the example of a Latina transsexual prostitute, Venus Extravaganza, to illustrate the limits of the subversive potential of transgender (Prosser, 1998: 45). Extravaganza, who featured in Jennie Livingston’s 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*, looked forward to sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to make her a ‘complete’ woman but was murdered by a client before she could go through with surgery precisely, according to Butler’s reading, as a result of his discovery of her penis. Other thinkers, such as Vivian Namaste (2000: 13), take issue with Butler’s reading arguing that Butler misses the specificity of the violence to which Extravaganza was subject: “Here is the point: Venus was killed because she was a transsexual *prostitute* (my emphasis)” and not simply because of her ‘incomplete’ body (Namaste, 2000: 13). In other words, transsexuality makes one more vulnerable to sex work as a means of survival and sex work makes one profoundly vulnerable to violence

of the kind visited upon Venus Extravaganza. According to Butler (2011 [1993]:89) if the norms of gender recognition were different, if they were *not* heteronormative, if women *could* safely have penises, and if the policing of heterosexual normativity were not so vicious, Extravaganza may well have lived. While this *may* be true, does it follow therefore that the aspiration to embody more stable and conventional genders makes one the tragic dupe of heteronormativity? This is certainly the suggestion of Butler's (1993 [2011]: 90) discussion of Extravaganza's death, which, according to Butler (*ibid*), is representative of a "tragic misreading of the social map of power"

Butler deploys the example of Extravaganza as a means of demonstrating that to transgender – whether in a drag ball or through one's sexual orientation or gender presentation – is not *always* subversive. We can mourn Extravaganza, but we cannot celebrate her gender, in other words. Butler's (2011 [1993]: 84-95) discussion and use of Extravaganza implies that transsexuals such as Extravaganza do not subvert heterosexual hegemonies because, as inferred from their desire for sex reassignment surgery and/or hormone therapy, they aspire to be recognized according to heterosexual gender norms. I do not wish to give the impression however that Butler is hostile towards transsexuals, even if she is patronizing towards them. Her reading of transsexuality and engagement with the content of transsexual lives is, as Connell (2012: 861) points out "strikingly more positive" than the radical feminist work that predates it. Butler might conclude that Extravaganza and other transsexuals who share her aspirations are mystified, but she does not demonize them.

Butler's other major accomplishment, and one that is particularly relevant for the theorization of transsexuals, was to show that sex is as socially constructed as gender

and that claims vis-à-vis a real or material body are frequently more normative than they are descriptive. As Katherine Johnson (2005: 36) notes,

In *Bodies that Matter*, [Butler] re-addressed the notion of gender construction by focusing upon the materialisation of 'sex'. Here, Butler argued that the process of materialisation '*stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*' (1993, 9, emphasis in original). Thus, there is no 'real' male or female body, only an unattainable ideal to aspire to become. This ideal is maintained through the reiteration and embodiment of gender norms cemented together by heterosexuality.

The implications of Butler's theoretical accomplishments for interpreting transsexual narratives from a queer perspective are clear: the categories male and female – which are critical to the experience and narratives of many transsexual people – are cultural fictions (and socially inept and politically troubling ones at that). The transsexual desire to establish harmony between gender and the body is treated in Butler's work and the work it inspires as a kind of a priori political problem that queer feminism needs to address (see, e.g. Halberstam, 1994: 210-28; Hausman, 1995; Salamon, 2004:116-7; Wilchins, 1997a). As queer theorist Judith Halberstam (1998:289) put it, "Why, in this age of gender transitivity, when we have agreed that gender is a social construct, is transsexuality a wide-scale phenomenon?"

The politics of passing

As I have argued, in the queer paradigm gender is argued to be a regulatory system which produces the categories of sexual and gender identity available to us (Butler, 2006 [1990]: 41). The norms of this regulatory system act as an implicit standard of

conduct embedded in social practice that guides gender and sexual behaviour in particular directions, incentivizing some expressions and preferences and providing disincentives for others (ibid). The fact that there is some flexibility surrounding the degree to which one is obliged to embody the norm or to realise it through social practice, is what makes it so effective; repressive power is found to be far less effective in guiding behaviour than the productive power of normative regimes (Butler, 2004: 41). But this flexibility also renders norms, and systems of norms, vulnerable to challenge; inevitably, some social actor arrives to 'fail', either on purpose or by accident, to embody the norm thereby exposing its status as a product of social construction (Butler, 2006 [1990]: 41). The crucial point with regard to transgender in queer theorising is that examples of transgender are routinely deployed to demonstrate that the hegemony of heterosexual gender is not nearly as ineluctable as it is so often made out to be (see, e.g. Beemyn & Eliason, 1996; Butler, 1990; Feinberg, 1996; Garber, 1992; Halberstam, 2005; Steyn & van Zyl, 2009; Wilchins, 2002). Thus, certain kinds of transgender identities embody political hope. Other identities, such as the transsexual, are rendered problematic.

However, the deployment of transsexual people – whether as celebrated examples of a challenge to heteronormativity or as examples of the embodiment of heteronormativity – is frequently carried out at the expense of any meaningful focus on the concrete conditions of transsexuals' lives, the usefulness of research to transsexual people, or the ethics of appropriating their experience to promote a political project of which they may not *necessarily* form a part, and, in some versions of queer, from which they are quite actively excluded (e.g. Wilton, 2000). This is linked to the a priori ethical/political stance that informs queer theory as a meta-framework – such that the use of the term

transsexual already carries a particular normative load prior to, and irrespective of, what particular transsexual people say or do. Furthermore, queer epistemology is deeply paradoxical insofar as it seems to see the effects of power in hegemonic spaces but seemingly not in counter-hegemonic ones. And although the argument that these categories as well as the links between them – for instance, male to man, man to heterosexual – are normatively produced may be sound, it does not describe the lived experience that transsexual men and women, and many non-transsexual people for that matter, have of sex and gender.

It is precisely because passing entails meeting certain norms, and because it is possible to refuse to meet these requirements, that one can argue that the act of passing entails a re-inscription or a social sanctioning of the normative status quo, and that passing is therefore a politically significant endeavour (e.g. Butler, 1991, 1993, and 2004). There are some ways in which passing *is* a choice, although choosing not to pass is often dangerous for the person who does so. It is for this reason that some queer theorists see those who pass according to the hegemonic norms to be politically conservative and problematic, even if they are sympathetic to the reasons that transsexuals wish to pass (e.g. to secure the rights attached to citizenship) (e.g. Stone, 2006 [1991]: 232). In the early 1990s, for instance, activists began to celebrate the potential of transsexual crossings (used in the sense that is today ascribed to transgender) to destabilize the gender binary. For Kate Bornstein (1994) transsexuals were valued examples of gender subversion, a theme pursued in her first book *Gender Outlaw: on men, women, and the rest of us*. Similarly, for Sandy Stone (1991), transsexuals revealed the ambiguous nature of gender, contesting constructions of gender as fixed or essential. The transsexual celebrated by Stone and Bornstein, and later the transgender person

celebrated by activist theorists such as Lesley Feinberg (1992) was obviously the transsexual who did *not* pass or aspire to pass, post-transition, as unambiguously a man or a woman, or as always having been a man or a woman.

The primary purpose of the queer struggle was, and remains, to render the fluidity of gender visible, and the person of the transgender was useful to accomplishing this. Kate Bornstein (1994: 52) valued transsexuality (read transgender), and saw herself as valuable, for the gender fluidity they/she made visible.

Gender fluidity”, she wrote, “is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules of gender. A fluid identity, incidentally, is one way to solve problems with boundaries. As a person’s identity keeps shifting, so do individual borders and boundaries. It’s hard to cross a boundary that keeps moving.

Part of the distinction between the terms transgender and transsexual in contemporary feminist and queer theory reflects normative appraisals of passing – transgenders who do not pass are ‘good’ or politically superior to transsexuals who do pass, or aspire to do so, and who are therefore ‘bad’ or at least naive (Roen, 2002: 503). Thus, transgender has gradually come to “presuppose a radical edge” (Ekins and King, 1999: 581), and is often used in binary opposition to transsexual. Indeed, in queer texts transsexual tends to function as queer’s other (Prosser, 1998: 27, 32).

Queer theory and Gender Identity Disorder

Queer theory also makes certain predictions vis-à-vis how gender variant people experience the medicalization of their difference that need to be examined because, on

the basis of these claims, queer theorists and activists tend to recommend structural changes that, at least in the short term, may create even greater difficulties for transsexual people. For instance, queer theory assumes that the medicalization of gender variance through the diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID) is necessarily traumatic for transsexual and transgender people (e.g. Butler, 2004: 76). As Butler (ibid) puts it, “to be diagnosed with gender identity disorder (GID) is to be found, in some way, to be ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal, and to suffer a certain stigmatization as a consequence of the diagnosis being given at all”. This is an empirical claim about how the diagnosis is lived that is *not* always born-out by research, as the findings of this study will show. Nevertheless, on the basis that the diagnosis has been and will be traumatic for some, and that it functions in accordance with heterosexual norms about the relationship between sex, gender, and desire - which it does - queer theorists and activists continue to push for its removal from the *American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* (e.g. Wilchins, 1997b; Winters, 2007). But, as Patricia Elliot (2009:14) and Trish Salah (2007: 153) have pointed out, queer’s engagement with the GID and with the concerns of transsexual people around retaining the GID has been largely inadequate. Butler, for instance, does not consider the voices of transsexual people who are in favour of retaining the GID in the *DSM* at all (Elliot, 2009: 14). Much of Butler’s (2004: 76, 78) argument against retaining the GID is based on the assumption a) that it is always experienced as traumatizing and b) that it is used to ‘deal with’ homosexuality circuitously by diagnosing gay children so as to facilitate the surgical realignment of their bodies with their sexualities as per heterosexual norms. Whilst the diagnosis may be experienced as traumatizing, that experience of it is not universal and needs to be weighed against the costs of removing the diagnosis once and for all before an alternative route to accessing treatment exists.

And, as Margaret O'Hartigan (cited in Elliot, 2009: 17) observed, on the basis of her own childhood experience, "parents who wish to abuse their gender-variant child will use any diagnosis they want". In other words, removing the diagnosis will not prevent homophobic or heteronormative parents from acting against their children. However, removing the *GID would* render legal access to medical interventions impossible in many parts of the world.

Part 3: Recent sociological accounts of transsexuality

In the late 1990's a scholarly response critical of queer theory and concerned with its hegemony in academic and activist circles in the US, and the effects thereof, began to cohere. I have already engaged with some of the critiques produced by this response in my examination of queer theory above and am concerned in this section of the review with extending the arguments of this work. Amongst other things, this work, which has mainly been developed by scholars working within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology - with some notable exceptions such as the literary theorist Jay Prosser and historians Judith Meyerowitz (2002) and Susan Stryker (2008a) - prioritised a phenomenological approach to transsexual subjectivities pursued through the methods of ethnography and life history interviews. Proponents noted that while poststructuralist, queer, and more conventional sociological approaches of the past such as ethnomethodologies had their merits, providing useful insights into questions of aetiology, identity, and certain dimensions of the nature of the relationship between power and identity, the excessive focus on gender and identity had its limitations (Namaste, 2000: 1). As Viviane Namaste (*ibid*) put it,

...our lives and bodies are made up of more than gender and identity...They are forged in details of everyday life...Our lives and bodies are constituted in the mundane and uneventful: going to the pawn shop; finding a doctor; bad clients; electrolysis; looking for a job; losing a lover; perfecting the art of binding breasts; trying to get a date; fixing junk; watching films featuring psychotic transsexual characters; learning how to inject hormones....

In other words, the empirical picture of transsexuality that emerged from the majority of prior work was, at best, incomplete. Apart from the drawback of this incompleteness for producing research that was both accurate and useful to improving the life circumstances of transsexual people, the empirical incompleteness also meant that when queer theorists began pursuing the normative implications of transsexuality, they often did so on the basis of an inaccurate or radically incomplete picture of transsexual practices and subjectivities which made their conclusions problematic.

Thus, scholars such as Viviane Namaste (ibid), herself a transsexual woman, exhorted researchers to roll up their sleeves and begin collecting data on how "TS/TG individuals are located in the world". Prosser (1998) and Rubin (1998, 2003) insisted that the subjective and somatic experience of transsexuality also not be ignored or dismissed as exhaustively produced by the workings of discursive power, given that there is evidence to suggest, for instance, that transsexuals have been and continue to be active agents in shaping the diagnosis of transsexuality. Also, the politics of transsexual people could not, when examined against empirical accounts of their lives, be inferred merely from the fact that they worked within the terms of the heterosexual gender binary. The social location of those dubbed transsexual, is the glaring omission of most queer theoretical and feminist work to date.

New transgender and transsexual scholarship suggested this form of gender variance be looked at phenomenologically first. This meant returning some authority to personal experience (Rubin, 1998). But these scholars were not naïve about the relationship between structure and agency. They retained some of the insights of queer and poststructuralist work by advocating that together with a phenomenological understanding of transsexuality, a genealogical analysis also take place so that experience could be understood as produced in particular historical and structural contexts (e.g. Bolin, 1994; Rubin, 1998, 2003; Valentine, 2007). Phenomenologies and ethnographies that balanced history against subjectivity, returning some authority to transsexual subjects' accounts of their experience whilst simultaneously paying attention to the historical context that gave rise to the categories through which they voiced their experience, began to appear (e.g. Bolin, 1994; Rubin, 2003; Valentine, 2007).

This work also used genealogical tools to deconstruct queer's orthodoxies by looking not at whom transgender 'rightfully' named, but at the experiential and political work that transgender accomplished (Valentine, 2007: 30-1). Advocates of a phenomenological approach to interpreting transsexuals' accounts of their lives, genders, and transitions sought to counter what they argued was a reductive reading of Foucault that had led many queer theorists to dismiss transsexuals' accounts of embodiment and gender identity as entirely an effect of power, or in some sense, a mode of false consciousness (Rubin, 1998: 264). In addition to the phenomenological recovery of transsexual experience, a sociological interest in transsexuals as categories of people located within a range of social institutions began to take shape (e.g. Coogan,

2006; Irving, 2008; Namaste, 2000, 2005; Solymár & Takács, 2007; Schilt & Wiswall, 2008; Valentine, 2007).

New theoretical work was also produced. Amongst the first sustained critiques of queer theory was the early work of Henry Rubin and Jay Prosser. In his 2003 phenomenological study of female-to-male transsexuality, *Self-Made Men*, Rubin argued that an examination of a material body that took stock of materiality as an experience and not just as a discursive effect was critical to understanding transsexual experiences of self and embodiment. Based on the findings of his work, Rubin (2003: 11) argued that,

Bodies are far more important to (gender) identity than are other factors, such as behaviours, personal styles, and sexual preferences. As identity has become increasingly detached from particular behaviours or preferences, bodies have become the main way of determining gender...My findings support the claim that bodies, especially secondary sex characteristics, facilitate intra- and inter-subjective recognition of a core (gendered) self. Bodies matter for subjects who are routinely misrecognized by others and whose bodies cause them great emotional and physical discomfort.

Like queer and poststructuralist theorists, Rubin (2003) saw a connection between recognition and power – i.e. that it is hegemonic norms that guide and police the social recognition of some categories of people as more human or as more entitled to various rights, and that the act of recognizing certain identities as legitimate and others as illegitimate may further re-inscribe hegemonic gender norms. But unlike some queer and poststructuralist scholars (e.g. Wilton, 2002; Garber, 1992) he did not read the desire of transsexual men and women to transition as either a manifestation of mystification, complicity, or a beleaguered surrender to an ineluctable heteronormative status quo. Instead, Rubin (2003: 149) argued that the predicament faced by

transsexual people is highly complex as they seek both to recognize their own bodies as well as to be recognized as the gender with which they identify by others. Thus, for the transsexual especially, “the ability of the self to recognize itself is a significant and necessary achievement that must precede inter-subjective recognition... [However] a self [also] needs others to recognize its authenticity” (Rubin, 2003: 15). If, as Rubin suggests, recognition is the central challenge for transsexuals, then a theory of recognition is crucial and will entail the notion of a core self.

Rubin (2003: 13) describes the core self thus:

Everyone has an internal identity. This interior is not just filled with organs and bones, but is also filled by something we might call a soul or self. There are many terms for this idea of internal identity, including “hermeneutic subject” and “core identity”. What all of them refer to is the sense of an internalized subjectivity that is sealed off from other subjects by virtue of being contained within the body.

Transsexual “life projects”, which share the feature of bringing one’s body back into alignment with one’s gender identity, in order to produce a body that one can recognize, and therefore inhabit with less agony, and to secure social recognition as one’s gender by others, (Rubin, 2003: 11) appear to be interpreted by some queer and poststructuralist theorists as epitomizing the effects of heteronormativity (Halberstam, 1994, 1998a; Hausman, 1995). This has implications for those transsexual people who identify as feminists and who want inclusion in the queer community.

In 1998, Jay Prosser published his critique of queer theory and proposal for a different theoretical account of transsexuality – *Second Skins: the body narratives of transsexuality*. In a similar vein to Rubin, Prosser (1998: 6) argued that queer theory’s rendition of transsexual transitions as purely discursive had rendered an exploration of

“the bodiliness of gendered crossings”, so central to many a transsexual’s life experience, not only conceptually impossible but also a political no-no. Thus, what was most central to the experience of transsexuality – its bodiliness – was either not being written about (and arguably could not be explored using queer theoretical tools) or was being written about in ways that suggested it was a political aberration (e.g. Wilton, 2002). Both authors offered contributions that would make a methodical exploration of this bodiliness both possible and plausible.

The 2000s saw a surge in the number of researchers taking an interest in the lived experience of transsexual experiences of embodiment and the relationship of those designated as transgender or transsexual to these terms (e.g. Valentine, 2007; Wilson, 2002). Amongst the major contributions to challenging received ideas within queer about the category transgender was David Valentine’s (2007) path-breaking ethnography *Imagining transgender: an ethnography of a category*. Set in New York in the 1990s Valentine’s study traversed the terrain of support-group meetings, drag bars, community activist centres, and red light districts, to produce an ethnographic account of how a group of men and women who were designated as transgender by scholars, activists, and NGO workers, related to the term. Having set out to study transgender people, Valentine soon discovered that the more interesting question had to do with how differently the category was understood and appropriated as a description of self (when it was appropriated at all) by the people whom it designated in academic and activist literature. The people who participated in Valentine’s study were more apt to refer to themselves as gay or lesbian (Valentine, 2007: 4-5). Valentine explored the question of how transgender was deployed and what the productive effects of its

deployment were, turning the focus of queer procedure on its head (Valentine, 2007: 30).

This work was followed by the first econometric studies of transition (see Irving, 2008; Schilt & Wiswall, 2008). Schilt and Wiswall (2008), for instance, explored the impact that transition has on earning potential revealing how male-to-female transsexuals take a dip both in earnings and work place authority and respect (even though their competencies remain unchanged by transition) and how female-to-male transsexuals may begin to benefit from the patriarchal dividend in terms of how much they can command in earnings and how they are treated in the workplace.

I hope, in this study, to make a small contribution to work that looks at transsexual experience in context and phenomenologically, and with a particular interest in how transsexual people encounter and render their embodiment, given that there has been a lag in this kind of work in the case of South African scholarship despite a burgeoning literature on issues of gender and sexuality more generally.

Part 4: The state of transgender studies in South Africa

The feminist literature on gender and sexuality produced by South African scholars, includes work on sexual and gender-based violence (e.g. Jewkes et al, 2010; Posel, 2005; Reid & Dirsuweit, 2002), lesbian and gay sexualities and identities (some explored specifically in the African context and as 'African' sexualities) (e.g. Epprecht, 2008; Potgieter, 1997; Reid & Walker, 2005; Reddy, 2004; Steyn & van Zyl, 2009; Tamale, 2011), masculinity studies (Pattman, 2007; Ratele, 2011, 2007), work on the question of feminism and pornography (Artz, 2012; Haysom, 2012; Matebeni, 2012;), and a much

smaller and more recent body of work dealing more explicitly with issues of transgender, transsexuality, and/or queer (e.g. Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009; Morgan & Reid, 2003; Morgan & Weiringa, 2005; Matebeni, 2011, 2012; Steyn & van Zyl, 2005, 2009; Vincent & Camminga, 2009). To date, however, there has been no published work that directly addresses the questions I have posed in this dissertation, namely, that makes a critical appraisal of queer theory within our empirical context, that explicitly investigates the phenomenology of transsexual embodiment, and that looks at the extent to which so-called transsexual and transgender people embrace the terms used to designate them. Moreover, authors writing on what can reasonably be construed as issues of transgender and transsexuality still have a tendency to lump transsexuals together with others who fall under the designation LGBTI or to use transgender to refer, in real terms, exclusively to LGB people (e.g. Ballard et al, 2005; Rebelo, Szabo, & Pitcher, 2008).

Although the range of gender-related issues that South African scholars have worked on is broad, there are certain empirical trends in their approaches. In the aggregate, for instance, feminist South African scholarship on gender has largely theorized gender and sexuality as social constructs which reflect the workings of power and bear the imprints of the historical, cultural, and material contexts in which they arise (e.g., Morgan & Weiringa, 2005; Pattman & Bhana, 2009; Posel, 2004; Steyn & van Zyl, 2005, 2009). This work may not all be of one mind so far as the question of *how* social construction actually takes place but, broadly speaking, scholars are in agreement that gender and sexuality, if not sex, are *not* delivered to us by nature or biology but rather by culture, history, material circumstances such as class, and in and through language, all of which

make them to some degree or another specific to place and time and bound up in power relations.

For example, in “Getting the Nation Talking about Sex”, Deborah Posel uses Foucauldian tools to argue that post-1994 discourses on sexuality bear the imprints of a tension between an extremely conservative, even draconian, past and a post-1994 constitution that made sexual and gender identification “a matter of right” (Posel, 2004: 53). In other words, South African discourses of sexuality are analysed by Posel as social things shaped by history, place, and time, and, in this case, as a contested political practice, given the freight of apartheid legacies in the ‘liberated’ present. Her central interest is in the articulation of notions of sex and sexuality within a wider political project. In “Colouring Sexualities: How some black South African schoolgirls respond to ‘racial’ and gendered inequalities”, Rob Pattman and Deevia Bhana (2009: 23) take a more explicitly social constructionist approach to race and gender in which these categories are theorized “not as essences” which make people behave in certain ways but as constructions “that make sense only in relation to characteristics constructed as other”. Pattman and Bhana (ibid) argue that gender, and race, are social and cultural accomplishments profoundly related to power, not inert or ineluctable biological givens. In a similar spirit, Sylvia Tamale (2011: 1) opens *African Sexualities: A reader* by explicitly situating such sexualities, and indeed the appellation ‘African’, as products of the cultural and historical complexities specific to the continent. Again, the underlying thinking about, in this case, sexuality, is that it is shaped by place, time, and social practices. The contributions that follow Tamale’s introduction assume the same position (e.g. Bennett, 2011; Ratele, 2011). The focus of Marc Epprecht’s (2008) monograph, *Heterosexual Africa?*, is on how the idea that homosexuality is ‘un-African’

came into being and gained the traction that it largely continues to enjoy today (Epprecht, 2008: 5). Again, Epprecht exemplifies a scholar getting to grips with the sociality and historicity of, in this case, sexuality. Epprecht's work, like Pattman and Bhana's, Posel's, and Tamale's, to mention just three of many possible scholars, takes a line on gender and sexuality which can reasonably be described as part of a family of approaches that treat sexuality and gender, amongst other categories of human experience, as social, historical, cultural, and material products, not brute biological facts. However, there is relatively little interest in any of this work in the experience of embodiment - nor any recourse to a phenomenological method of inquiry.

The other characteristic of gender and sexuality scholarship of the last two decades is that it is increasingly concerned with how race and class shape and intersect with gender. The suggestion, given this country's history, is that the experience of sexuality and gender is inseparable from that of race and class. Oliver Phillips' (2005) work on changes in South African masculinities over a twenty year period between 1987-2000 looks explicitly at the intersection between race and gender in producing white masculinities (Phillips, 2005: 137). Shefer et al.'s (2007) volume on masculinity studies - *From Boys to Men: Social Constructions of Masculinity in Contemporary Society* - also locates itself within the tradition I have described above. Rob Pattman's (2007: 33-50) contribution to the volume reflects on researching and working with young black men on HIV/Aids related issues and looks at the intersections between race and gender in the construction of such men as dangerous and hedonistic.

What of the South African scholarship on transgender, transsexuality and queer? Some of this work reflects on issues of transgender without placing queer politics front and centre (e.g. Morgan & Reid, 2003); other work is very explicitly queer. Steyn and van Zyl

(2009: 7) for instance, in their volume on South African sexualities, *The Prize and the Price*, in a move that resonates with queer theory, refer to the category of 'intersex' to demonstrate the disruption of the "natural' binary sex system". Critical queer scholarship, they note (2009: 7), "has unearthed a variety of cultural permutations of sexual and (trans)gender subjectivities and identities that perform as dissident sexualities – beyond the boundaries of normativity". This work, much as other queer work from the global North has done, mobilizes transsexual and transgender subjectivities to show the cracks in normative heterosexuality.

Morgan and Reid's (2003) paper has revealed a repertoire existent in indigenous African cultures to accommodate deviations from the heterosexual norm amongst sangomas. In "I've got two men and one woman": ancestors, sexuality and identity among same-sex identified women traditional healers in South Africa", Morgan and Reid (2003: 375) show that same-sexual practices are accommodated amongst women traditional healers on the basis of the idea that their desire for other women is a function of being called to traditional healing by male ancestors. This accommodates their difference without threatening heterosexuality as a norm. This is particularly pertinent to my work, given that one of the respondents was a sangoma and explained his gender identity in the terms that Morgan and Reid's respondents did.

The gaps in this literature include a focus on embodiment and an obvious void where issues of transsexual embodiment are concerned. However, the position that sex, gender, and sexuality bear the imprints of social power is not one with which I disagree. In terms of my own work, I attempt to extend the insight that social power is evident in how such categories are thought *and* lived by looking not just at how respondents understood and related to the categories transgender and transsexual and experienced

their bodies but also at the social circumstances in which these experiences and attitudes took place and shape.

Chapter 3: Methods

In this chapter, I set out the study's methodology. I then present the logic that informed my choice of sampling technique and discuss the constitution of the sample in terms of race, class, gender and other salient variables and the implications of these for the findings. I also present the methods of gathering and analysing the data and discuss the limitations of the research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relevant ethical issues.

Methodology

The study is located within a qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research investigates "human action [and experience] from the perspective of the social actors themselves" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001 [1998]: 270). Typically, it engages in "describing and understanding ... human behaviour" as opposed to measuring or predicting it (ibid). As I argued in the preceding chapter, queer theorists' analyses of transsexuality are sometimes empirically lacking – either due to a paucity of detail or due to hypergenerality devoid of empirical specificity (e.g. Butler, 1993; Halberstam, 1998; Hausman, 1995; Wilton, 2000). For this reason, locating the study in the qualitative paradigm is particularly appropriate, because qualitative research allows for richly descriptive and interpretative accounts that place the emphasis, though hopefully not uncritically so, on subjective experience as more than just a structural or discursive effect and yet at the same time qualitative approaches are often able to utilise subjective

experience in order to illuminate “the social context within which the personal is lived and experienced” (Vincent & Camminga, 2009: 680).

Given that this study is specifically interested in the meanings that social actors attribute to their experience, as profoundly constitutive (although not exhaustively causative) of that experience, a phenomenological approach is appropriate. The trajectory of phenomenological research that I am interested in is rooted in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty whose “philosophy of the body” offers an account of embodiment that goes beyond the scientific to include not only phenomena that can be “mathematized and objectified” but also the experiential phenomenon of the lived body about which quantitative data can tell us little (Bigwood, 1991: 61). Because all social categories are lived, categories other than the body can also be explored phenomenologically. Thus a phenomenological account of how the men and women who participated in this research related to the categories of transgender and transsexual is a methodologically sound choice. The key strength of such an approach is that it gets to grips with subjective experience, and in the plethora of queer and poststructuralist reflections on transsexuality, there has been little focus on transsexual subjectivities as they are lived. As suggested in the previous chapter, there is also a growing body of sociological work on transsexuality that attests to the merits of a phenomenological approach to researching transsexual subjectivities (e.g. Griggs, 1998; Johnson, 2007; Rubin, 2003).

Phenomenology is sometimes charged with denying the socially embedded character of personal experience (Rubin, 1998: 267) but arguably phenomenology does not entail the denial of the sociality of all experience; rather the issue is an epistemological one,

about where to start in making sense of experience. Phenomenological social research is specifically concerned with close examinations of “... lived situations, often first-person accounts, set down in everyday language and avoiding abstract intellectual generalizations” as the appropriate starting point for understanding experience (Finlay, 2009: 10). Although some critics argue that phenomenological approaches place *too much* emphasis on the subjective and not enough on the historical, the discursive, and the structural (Rubin, 2003: 25), it is possible to take a phenomenological approach to individual experience without depoliticizing such experience by severing it from the social, cultural, and linguistic context in which it arises. For instance, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987:7-8), locating themselves to an extent within the phenomenological tradition, propose three perspectives, which are not mutually exclusive, from which the body can be viewed: 1) as an individual experience, 2) as symbolic tool, and 3) as a “body politic”.

An approach to the body that treats it as an individual experience is obviously phenomenological (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987: 7). From this perspective it is possible to see that much of how social actors experience their bodies is highly variable between individuals and yet, given patterns in experience between actors from similar backgrounds, clearly also shaped by one’s social location (ibid). The symbolic body refers to “the representational uses of the body as a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society, and culture” (ibid). And the “body politic” refers to the body that is subjected to and produced by the exercise of social power in the forms of surveillance, control, and regulation (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987: 8). Analysis of the symbolic body and the “body politic” is what poststructuralist and queer research has focused on, frequently to the exclusion of the body as an individual experience, particularly where

transsexual embodiment is concerned. Although this study does not attempt to look comprehensively at body from all three of the perspectives Scheper-Hughes and Lock describe, it retains awareness that the body as a personal experience is not severed from the body as a symbolic tool or from the body as a site of the social workings of power. To this end, in exploring the data, I look both at the personal experiences that emerge from respondents' stories but also at what the data reveals about how the social contexts of respondents gave rise to particular themes of personal experience. So, for instance, the fact that the respondents of this study were all drawn from relatively economically affluent backgrounds shaped their early experiences of their gender in ways that are very particular to being middle class. For instance, the MtFs had access to clothing and other gendered 'stuff' with which to express their identities as young girls and later as women; as children they also had their own bedrooms and private spaces in which to experiment with this 'stuff'. Had they been drawn from seriously impoverished backgrounds, without the advantages for experimentation that money and privacy offer, different experiences of transsexual embodiment may well have emerged from their stories.

Methodologically, however, the aim of this study was first and foremost to produce a subjective account of the experience of being designated as transsexual or transgender alongside an account of the experience of 'transsexual' embodiment. So, although I considered the wider social conditions and contexts of experience insofar as they emerged in the subjective accounts – such as the impact of social class – what I aimed to produce was a hermeneutic of social experience that largely stayed with the perspectives of my informants. I have not conducted independent research into the contexts that shaped them, although of course have been mindful that individual

subjectivity is always a social product and practice. However, my sociological reflections and interpretations of what people told me have included, where appropriate, a recognition of how that wider shaping has been powerful and instructive.

Sampling technique

The sampling technique for this project was purposive. A purposive sample, unlike a probability sample, selects respondents non-randomly and on the basis of their appropriateness to the task of producing data relevant to the research question (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 166-167). There were several reasons for this choice of sampling technique: 1) The research population is socially marginal and therefore hard to access; 2) There is no appropriate sampling frame from which to construct a representative sample; 3) The study is a small case study with no intentions to produce generalizable findings. For these reasons, I chose to work with a purposively selected group of people in order to be able to work in greater depth than would otherwise have been possible.

Description of the sample

The sample comprised of 6 adult respondents. It was heterogeneous in terms of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, the direction of respondents' transitions (i.e. male-to-female *and* female-to-male 'transsexuals' participated), and the extent of transition (i.e. one respondent had not begun her physical transition and only occasionally took up her preferred social role as a woman; another was satisfied with the results of hormones and had no intentions to have surgery; and one wanted the whole package of medical and self-presentational interventions from voice coaching to vaginoplasty). Three of the

respondents self-identified as white, two as coloured, and one as black and African (these were used by him interchangeably). They ranged in age from 23 to the mid 60's.

In terms of class the sample was *relatively* homogenous. If the designations of race and gender were supplied by the respondents themselves, in the case of class I designated respondents on the basis of information they supplied, and on a largely Weberian understanding of class, i.e. class as the product of one's standard of living, income, and level of education. With this in mind, I considered what they told me about their level of education and where they had attended school, their lifestyle – where they lived, how much discretionary income they had, whether they could afford private health care or not, owned property or not, could afford to retire or not and so on. I also considered the degree of privacy and access to 'stuff' with which to express gender that characterised their accounts of their childhoods. Of the six, four had some form of tertiary qualification (though only two had attended university) and two had no tertiary qualifications. All had matriculated. At the time that fieldwork was conducted, two were employed fulltime, one part-time, one was in the process of leaving her job in order to be able to go through with her transition, and one was retired. Two owned property. In terms of the standard of living experienced by respondents there was certainly a spectrum and the distribution of wealth, as evidenced by the tell-tale signs of discretionary income –who could afford private health care, for instance – correlated with race. The oldest respondent for instance was a male-to-female 'transsexual' woman who had attended university, owned property, and had a modest pension. The youngest, a black female-to-male 'transsexual' man, had matriculated and had a fulltime position in an NGO but did not own property and certainly could not afford, at the time that we met, to access private health care. So, although the sample was homogenous in

terms of the fact that all the respondents could reasonably be described as middle class on the definition given above there was certainly a spectrum, which, as the life stories show, had an impact on their experiences of their bodies, transitions, and genders. Overall however, the fact that all my respondents were middle class, bore powerfully on the ways they experienced their bodies, sexuality and gender, as children and as they grew into adulthood. And this was linked, in very South African ways, to their racial classification and self-identification.

One's social class and race obviously have a profound effect on how an individual experiences his or her body. For instance, middle class children tend to have more personal and private physical space in which to explore and experiment with their bodies. This is not to say that such exploration does not happen amongst working class children but rather it is to acknowledge that, say, the early life experiences of transsexual children must be shaped by, amongst other things, their access to 'stuff' – makeup, clothing, perfume, toys – through which to signal gender to others and to private spaces in which to explore and express gender identities which are generally too stigmatized to express freely and openly. Thus, in terms of this sample, the fact that everyone grew up within the spectrum of the middle class was relevant to their patterns of experience. The class privilege of the sample was also reflected in their high levels of literacy and linguistic sophistication in English including in cases where this was not their first language – some of the material analysed in this dissertation was solicited through email correspondence, for instance.

One of the striking features of my interviews was the extent to which my respondents *didn't* speak about racial prejudice as a factor in how they experienced their bodies or

transitions. However, if the question of race was not mentioned directly, it was certainly a factor in shaping respondent experiences insofar as it shaped the 'infrastructure' of those experiences. The white and coloured respondents for instance described childhoods replete with black domestic workers. One articulated the type of concerns over the accessing the public health care system for her surgeries that suggested racially prejudiced concerns over the capabilities of black medical professionals, which is a common trope of white discourse in this country. One respondent used racist language to describe a black domestic employee of her family as "the boy" – also a common description of black male domestic workers (gardeners usually) during apartheid and one that older white people continue to use even today. One respondent, who is coloured according to South African racial categorizations, indirectly described the impact of the Group Areas Act and the curfew that controlled the movement of black and coloured people, when he told me of the difficulties he experienced attending a support group for transgender people held in a then 'whites only' neighbourhood. Another commented that the current transgender rights movement is dominated by the concerns of its white members who exert undue influence on shaping the movements agendas, often patronizing or excluding black transgender people.

The other factor worth considering in terms of how one's social location affects one's personal experience is culture. Four respondents spoke about the role of religious cultural resources in shaping their experiences of gender and embodiment. Three described how their Christian convictions had made them feel profoundly guilty about their gender identities. One told me that she had been able to use her Christian beliefs to justify her choice to transition and another, who is both a Christian pastor and a

sangoma, drew on what is a well-established cultural repertoire in indigenous Southern African cultures that allows for gender and sexual variance (from the heterosexual norm) in the case of people who are called by their ancestors to be traditional healers (see, Morgan & Reid, 2003; Morgan & Weiringa, 2005). I discuss this further in the chapter on respondents' life stories.

It is important to consider the impact of the fact that the majority of the sample were or had been involved in transgender activism at one point or another. All had practice in telling their stories. All delivered their stories with fluency, very high degrees of reflexivity and intellectual sophistication, but mostly with the kind of panache that usually comes from practice. I am not suggesting however that their stories were dishonest or insincere; rather, I am suggesting that their activist ties and practice in telling their stories has given them access to a language that is sophisticated and politicized and that must be taken into account given that it cannot be assumed that all transsexual people have access, or want to have access, to the same kind of discourse in which to render the meaning of their experiences. It is not possible to measure the impact of this fact – that respondents were mostly activists – on the findings but it needs to be made clear, acknowledged at least, that to some extent what this research found was influenced by the fact that the people who participated in it were both practiced story tellers and, to varying degrees, politicized. I suspect however, that being a practiced story teller is something in the nature of the experience of transsexuality given that transsexual people are required socially and institutionally (in their dealings with the state and the medical profession for instance) to give an account of themselves again and again. That these people had reflected at some length and were accustomed to speaking about their gender and gender related issues meant that they were prepared

to tell me things that others less accustomed to the prodding of researchers might not have been prepared or comfortable to divulge. Their political commitments may also have meant that they sometimes gave me a version of the story that fit with an official activist narrative as opposed to being one with which they necessarily agreed or resonated.

Finally, this study looked both at the experience of MtFs and FtMs. There are of course aspects of transsexual experience that are specific to the direction of transition; however, it was not within the scope of this research to explore those. I have, however, been careful to consider where differences in accounts may be due to the direction of transition.

Data gathering methods

The data gathering process for the project began with a period of observation of the community of transgender activists and gender variant people from which the sample was drawn. I engaged briefly in the observation of social gatherings and events held by Gender DynamiX (GDX) that focused on transgender issues, facilitating discussions about these issues. I don't wish to exaggerate the scope of these observations: they were brief. However, I felt I needed to begin with a period of observation to get a sense of the broader context of the 'transgender' community and its allies. I also examined the GDX website at some length. At the time, GDX was the only organisation of its kind dedicated to facilitating transition for those 'transsexual' people who wished it and advocating for a range of interventions and supports for the 'transgender' community as a whole. All of the individuals interviewed for the study passed through its doors at one point or another, most prior to starting their medical-physical transitions. The organization

helped to facilitate many of their individual transitions in one way or another, e.g. helping them to initiate the formal process of evaluation by a psychologist and a panel of medical experts that is necessary in order to access state assisted interventions.

The primary data gathering method for the study was the semi-structured life history interview followed by more focused in-depth interviews. In the life histories I focused on building up a biographical account of each respondent in relation to their experiences of gender and their social contexts and in the interviews that followed I honed in on the key themes that emerged from the life histories. By taking life histories I was able to look not just at personal experience but also at my informants' versions of their social contexts and how these shaped their experiences. As is broadly the case with qualitative methods, life history interviews get a grip not just on individual experience but also on the cultural, material, and historical context in which it is produced (Connell, 2010: 55). Thus biography can be applied both to the study of subjective experience and to the process of understanding social structures such as gender, class, race, citizenship and so forth, which contribute to the production of personal experience (ibid).

The follow-up interviews and email queries allowed me to focus on elements of the life histories that were most pertinent to my topic and needed further clarification or development. Some of the most interesting responses to my questions were received via email, a form in which some respondents seemed to feel even more comfortable than they did in the face-to-face interviews. This is possibly a function of the fact that, during electronic communications, respondents were unlikely to feel overly scrutinized and therefore may have felt more comfortable taking their time before responding (Vincent

& Camminga, 2009: 681). On the other hand, the benefit of time spent face-to-face with respondents was precisely that I was able to observe non-verbal reactions (ibid).

The face-to-face interviews were recorded, transcribed and saved on tape and digitally. Email correspondence was also saved in digital format. As all respondents spoke English fluently, translators were not necessary.

Method of analysis

The method of analysis for this study was thematic content analysis. To analyze interview content thematically simply means to comb through interviews and other sources of data looking for patterns (van Zyl, 2012:n.p) suggested as interesting or pertinent by the research question. Those patterns are then analyzed against existing theory or used to build, or interpret a theory (Van Zyl, 2012: n.p). In this case the patterns that interested me were those that pertained to how respondents understood the terms transgender and transsexual, how they experienced their bodies, what kinds of identities they valued, and how they experienced the medicalization of their difference, and their experience of embodiment in general. Once I had established these patterns I brought existing theory to bear on the findings and the findings to bear on the theory. I looked at how effectively queer theory accounted for the patterns I was encountering as well as how these patterns challenged the interpretative orthodoxies of queer modes of theorizing transgender and transsexuality. However, as I have stressed above, I also took care to ensure that the sociological relevance of the data was not overshadowed by an exclusive focus on how it was pertinent to queer theorizations thereof.

Ethical considerations

Feminist scholars share a concern about the ethical implications of inquiring into and appropriating the experiences of vulnerable and/or disenfranchised communities for one's own ends. This debate, on-going for many years, originates in legitimate anxieties about the exploitation and objectification of research subjects (see Mauthner et al., 2002). However, some order of appropriation is part of what researchers do. In order to research, we create a rapport with subjects that we might otherwise not if we encountered the same people in our day-to-day lives. In other words, the rapport functions with a self-serving end in mind even if the researcher happens to be part of the research population. As Duncombe and Jessop (2002: 188) put it,

Our interest in rapport was stimulated by our own research, where we found that in order to persuade some of our women interviewees to talk freely, we needed consciously to exercise our interviewing skills in '*doing rapport*' with — or rather *to* — them. Uncomfortably, we came to realize that even feminist interviewing could sometimes be viewed as a kind of *job* where, at the heart of our outwardly friendly interviews, lay the instrumental purpose of persuading interviewees to provide us with data for our research, and also (hopefully) for our future careers.

There are orders of magnitude to how invasive this process is; some practices are clearly unacceptable, others somewhat fuzzy. Although research on such highly stigmatised and dangerous-to-live realities as transsexuality always involve some risk, I was fortunate to work with respondents who are mature adults, most of whom are activists and relatively open about their status, have good support networks, and many of whom are highly politicized. Although this does not mean they were invulnerable they were certainly empowered people who did not hesitate to put me in my place – this is reflected in some of their responses featured in the analysis chapters below – if they felt my questions were invasive or irrelevant or patronizing. This is not to say that a

thorough and well-reasoned consideration of the ethics of my project can be dispensed with or that efforts to limit any harmful effects of the research are unnecessary.

In order to satisfy the most basic ethical demands, ethical clearance was obtained at the departmental presentation of the dissertation as specified by the Faculty of Humanities' policy on research involving human subjects. This involved ensuring that the following criteria were met:

- i. Informed consent: The researcher explained the study and why it was being carried out to all respondents. All respondents were asked for their permission to participate in interviews. No underage respondents participated. Respondents were asked for their consent to all recordings made during the interviews.
- ii. Anonymity and confidentiality: all respondents were given the option to remain anonymous if they so desired. Confidential information given by respondents was treated as such.
- iii. Respondents were offered no incentives to participate.

In order ensure that the practices of this study did not violate ethical standards for social science research, the study was conducted with due sensitivity: most significantly this meant establishing prior to commencing the interview process that all respondents had adequate support networks, so that if the process caused discomfort or surfaced traumatic memories respondents had a source of support. It also meant honouring the commitment to treat confidential material as such and not to violate the anonymity of respondents.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study are inherent to a small case study, whilst others marked my particular research experience. For instance, due to the size of the sample and the fact that it was not randomly constructed, it isn't possible to make meaningful generalizations on the basis of the findings. On the other hand, some of the findings of this work echo those of other work on similar questions with larger samples of transsexual men and women and conducted in greater depth than what I accomplished here (see, e.g. Rubin, 2003; Valentine, 2007; Wilson, 2002). My not being transsexual must also have had an impact on what people were prepared to tell me. Certainly, respondents intimated my outsider status by correcting me from time to time, as is evident in one of the excerpts in the analysis chapters below.

Chapter 4: Exploring respondents' life stories

This chapter introduces the study's respondents in terms of their life stories so as to make biographical sense of their relationship to the concepts of transgender and transsexual. However, this introduction is not just a preface to the work of the next chapter in which I examine the data in terms of how it speaks to the central research question - how do respondents relate to their designation as transgender/transsexual? Providing the respondents' biographies in this chapter serves as more than just an introduction, allowing me to interpret their attitudes and choices in both a social and temporal context - in other words, emphasising the *processes* by means of which personal norms, judgements and identities emerge. The life stories of respondents are in and of themselves challenging and enriching to existing gender theory on

transsexuality. By presenting the life stories I am also able to reflect on the impact of transsexuality – typified by the experience of contradictory embodiment (Connell, 2009) – for family ties, sexual and emotional intimacy, and economic and social security. I also reflect on what the life stories of respondents revealed about the relationship of class and racial positioning to how gender and embodiment were experienced. Given the centrality of the experience of contradictory embodiment to transsexual life experiences, I also look at respondents’ relationships to and experiences of their bodies in a variety of contexts including sexual intimacy, puberty, and the process of transition – hormones, surgeries, and self-presentation – again, as processes that take shape over time, through different phases of life. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of how the themes that emerged from the life stories speak to existing feminist and queer theorizations of such lives. I reflect on the importance of a sense of temporal flow or flux in the consolidation of a transsexual self – how the sexual journeying is never fully complete and does not have a teleological structure even for those transsexual men and women who might aspire to such a structure. This flow and flux makes the biographical method a central part of the exercise I am undertaking. What is interesting about the unstable nature of the journey is that although queer theory can be used to theorize it, queer theory, as I have shown in the literature review, tends to treat the gender journeys and gender identities of transsexuals as more static than they actually are. The findings of this chapter complicate that treatment significantly.

“Rose or die”

Rose and I met at a workshop for volunteer care-givers at a Cape Town hospital. I was working for the NGO that provided the training and Rose was a trainee. We had an

immediate affinity for one another and quickly became friendly. During the early days of our acquaintance Rose told me something of her life story. When I decided to do Master's research on transsexuality she was the first person I asked to participate. She also helped me to find other respondents for the study.

Rose is a retiree in her 60s. She is white, middle class, and old enough to have lived a significant part of her life during apartheid. Although her pension is not large it is significant enough to allow her to pursue a passion for photography, take the occasional trip, and pay the rates and taxes on the seaside flat she owns. As I will show, this relative affluence has a connection to how she has experienced her body.

Rose was born male in the early 1940s in Johannesburg to a nuclear middle-class family and describes herself as "raised high Anglican" with incense, guilt, and confession. The South Africa of the times was already a rigidly racialised, strongly patriarchal society, with high degrees of religiosity, associated with moral conservatism (see Vincent & Camminga, 2009). This was a society that had outlawed 'sexual deviance', including interracial sexual relationships, with stringent legislation to punish offenders (Posel, 2001:66; also see Vincent & Camminga, 2009). Rose's family partook of this kind of family and social insertion – it was white, middle class, Anglican, and Rose's descriptions of black people are all in the context of domestic workers and menial labourers. This upbringing, particularly its Christian content, left her morally conflicted about her gender identity. Yet ironically, it was the Christian doctrine of the immortal soul that would later prove to be an important resource to Rose in making sense of her predicament and legitimizing her decision to make a physical transition and to live openly as a woman.

[...] one day I sort of made the decision, well, kill myself or be myself, and then, sort of around that time I was in the cathedral in town down on my knees praying again as usual [...] and then I sort of had a “pow!” and I thought, you know, they say that we’ve got a soul and the soul lives forever, they say we’ve got bodies and they don’t live forever, so if my soul is feminine and it’s in a male body I’m not affecting the eternal part of me to try and bring the short lived part of me in line and sort of to myself. And I make a strong point there – it worked for me (interview 1).

Rose has made creative use of Christian cosmology to explain her choices and make them acceptable both to others and to her. Rose is not the only respondent who made creative use of her cultural resources in order to legitimize her choices. That she felt the need to do so is telling insofar as it speaks to the ethnomethodological point that there are social rules that govern gender; a point which feminist gender theorists such as West and Zimmerman (1987), extended by observing that we are all held accountable for our conduct when we break the rules.

When Rose was three years old her father died. She cites his death as the emotional catalyst for her physical transition some forty years later when she realised that it was “Rose or die”.

[...] My dad died at roughly the age of 40, 43, somewhere around about there, and I had grown up as a kid at one level sort of hero worshipping this gone father and I had a concept in my head [that] when I got to about the age that my dad died I’d die [...] when I discovered that I’d got to the age or just beyond the age that dad was when he died and I was still in a male body and that this wasn’t going to happen automatically, I’d better start doing something about it, that was when I really started trying to, to do things (interview 1).

For many transsexual people resolving the experience of contradictory embodiment is an imperative that one denies or delays at one's own peril (see Morgan, Marais, & Wellbeloved, 2009). Rose, for instance, made a number of suicide attempts prior to her decision to "start doing something about it". She attributes these desperate acts to the toll exacted by the labour of trying to be a man, which entailed constantly wresting the secret of her woman-self back into the concealment of her birth body and experimenting with slightly more socially acceptable, though less satisfying, means of self-expression such as cross-dressing. This choice appears to have been largely a response to perceived familial or societal pressure as I will show below.

After the death of her father Rose was raised by her mother, two sisters, and grandmother. From Rose's description this was a middle class home replete with 'stuff' – e.g. mom's clothes, shoes, perfumes, furs etc. Rose's interpretation of the significance of this all-women household for her gender identity suggests a lived understanding of the political dimension of representing transsexual childhoods. It is not uncommon, for example, to represent transsexuality as the effect of a dysfunctional childhood or 'bad' parenting (usually attributed to the mother) that is thought to cause cross-gender identification (Connell, forthcoming in *Feminism and Psychology*). Although Rose surmises that it was there that she "unconsciously absorbed femininity like a sponge – how to behave, good manners, Mom's shoes, clothes, her Fox, her scents and so on...", she quickly points out that she was as fond of 'boy's' pursuits as she was of 'girl's', offering as evidence a list of activities that included playing with Meccano, roaming the veldt hunting squirrels as well as the more standard little girl pursuits of knitting and playing house. However, she does not conflate her gender with the pursuits that she enjoyed as a child; that is not the important source of evidence for her. Rose's

reflections on early childhood influences and the role they may have played in shaping her gender identity appear to challenge the commonplace notion that transsexuality is a response to familial dysfunction, a bogy in the psychological closet, or a failure of the Oedipal complex to take; lines of argument that are the stock in trade of popular common-sense and psychological aetiologies alike (ibid). Here is Rose on the matter:

Gender has always been a questionable matter to me. As a small child, I recall hearing grown-ups talking about what happened to men during the war – killings, mutilation, concentration camps. Maybe I decided then that when I grew up I would be a woman. I also recall lying on a towel by the municipal swimming baths examining the ankles of all who walked by, and thinking that maybe it was not such a good idea to grow up as a woman, as most of their ankles were not very pretty – full of blue veins (Rose's talk).

This anecdote begins with the memory of the traumas associated with masculinity, which Rose offers as a 'cause' for her gender identity. However, she appears to put that interpretation – that she is transsexual because she experienced masculinity to be traumatic – in its place by being flippant about the off-putting blue-veined ankles of the swimming pool women. It is possible to read this juxtaposition of the serious – masculinity as brutal – with the flippant – femininity being not worth the varicose veins that accompany it – as a comment on the idea that transsexuality is caused by trauma. I would argue that my interpretation, which is that Rose is commenting on the more clichéd but typical narratives about what 'causes' transsexuality, is given weight by the fact that Rose is a well-read woman acquainted with Freudian and Jungian psychology and, by dint of her life experiences, well aware of the idea that transsexuals are forged in the furnace of childhood trauma.

Rose described herself as a creative and emotionally sensitive child and so the family home, in which she was granted the expression of emotions and preferences that are

normatively the purview of little girls, and that would have been particularly unwelcome in the increasingly militarized, hyper-masculine and swelteringly homophobic atmosphere of apartheid South Africa (see Vincent & Camminga, 2009), must have been something of a relief to her. Perhaps because she was raised by women, Rose did not think of herself as different to start off with (which is *not* the same as saying that she didn't associate being a girl with female embodiment or that she only began to think of herself as a girl because of how her body affected what she was and wasn't permitted to do). However, she only came to an awareness of how different she was through exposure to her peers.

At home Rose was allowed to knit, play house-house, and run to her older sister for comfort without being reprimanded, which, at the time, would have been unusual for a boy child. At school she was bullied or disciplined for this 'effeminacy'.

Rose (interview 1): What was horrible about school, number one I wasn't at home, so I was, because of this thing that I had between my legs I was deemed to be a boy and I was

Emma: [interrupting] is that different from how you were treated [at home]?

Rose: Well at home I, I wasn't, I wasn't treated so much if you know what I mean. I was just me at home, ja. Yes, everybody knew I was a boy but if I wanted to go do knitting or something I did it at home, couldn't do that at school, also the fact was that, that it was this terrible rigid atmosphere and rules and regulations and you've got to do this and you've got to do that. I didn't like the sports, I didn't like lots of things, and I just felt very out of it, you know? It wasn't the place that, that I kind of looked forward to.

It was at school that the social meaning of her body became clear to her. It is easy to read this in the standard light: Rose wanted to change her body because she discovered

that it barred her authentic self-expression. In other words, she wanted to change her body so that she could knit, etc. However, until adolescence, Rose believed, with unwavering and heart-breaking certainty, that her body was going to change automatically during puberty and so, as frustrating as school was in terms of forcing her to act like a 'boy', it was not the cause of her desire to change her sexed embodiment or the source of her experience of contradictory embodiment.

Although the home environment was a less exigent one, Rose's family were hardly unconcerned with inculcating gender appropriate behaviour. The limited reprieve offered by the family home was brought into sharp relief when Rose was sent to boarding school as part of a campaign to toughen her up.

My mom was apparently very worried about me, she felt that I was too soft, that I needed to be toughened up and because of that she sent me to boxing lessons which were a disaster and then she sent me to a boarding-school, which I hated, and at the ripe old age of 67 and a bit I'm happy to say that I still have nightmares about school (interview 1).

Prior to school, Rose thought of herself as "just me"; at school, she began to feel like "the only petunia in the onion patch". She also realised that her girl self was something worth concealing.

While at Boarding School I made maps at a furious rate. These maps had places like "Be a Good boy land", "Here be Bullies", "Here be Teachers", "Here be my secret places to hide". I was still searching for "Here be Me". An increasing number of maps I had were made by other people. They thought they knew better than I did, gave me their maps, told me where to go to find myself. I realised that MY secret maps had places other people did not know or care about. Secret unmentionable places. My girl places (Rose's talk).

Despite the harsh social education provided by boarding school, Rose remained surprisingly innocent, proudly bragging to her peers that she had “lady’s hips” and being openly miffed when she was finally obliged to start shaving her face. However, Rose was never delusional about her anatomical sex nor did she repudiate her penis. Her male body, she thought, was a mistake that time would rectify. She describes pitying the first transsexual person whose story she encountered on the back page of the *Sunday Times* as “she had had to have surgery; I was just going to change” (Rose’s talk). Despite this confidence, she cried herself to sleep at night, so profound were her anxieties over how or when this longed for change would actually come about.

With the onset of puberty, the “rot”, as Rose describes it, “set in”.

[...] it took a long time to realize the link between playing downstairs and anything coming out because that took a long time, and I remember that when that happened I thought wow, you know, I could happily drown myself while I do this, kind of idea. Not that it was a death wish it was just, you know, *something*. The body *worked*, the mind didn’t. And that was the beginning [...] this is where I would say the rot started setting in, because I became aware of a body that because I had that body, because it was meant to do certain things, because it developed in certain ways, and because the body wanted certain releases, I found the body pulling me in a certain direction but my concept of myself, my mind, wasn’t in tune with that and then I sort of started realizing, you know, I wasn’t happy (interview 1).

Rose responded to the “pull” of this alien body – she never refers to it as “my body” preferring “the body” instead – by engaging in the arduous and unpleasant labour of trying to pass as the young man she was *supposed* to be.

Yes, I went through all the usual shit, I had girlfriends and I, you know, I tried to make love to them, and all that kind of stuff, but it was...on the one hand the body was pushing

me that way on the other hand left just alone quietly and everything I would quite like to sort of identify with them, there was a strong sense of identification with them [...] (interview 1).

It was only in University that the extent and meaning of her difference from her peers fully dawned on her.

Rose: [...] perhaps the only time it hit *me* was when I was at varsity listening to the chaps talking about all their conquests and everything and I timidly asked a friend of mine if he'd ever felt that he was a woman or he'd like to be a woman and I got such a response that I never *dared* ask anybody again.

Emma: What did he...?

Rose: Well I mean, "What? Never!" You know, this kind of thing...Bah! He just shut the door he wasn't even prepared to talk about it (interview 2).

Despite deepening distress, Rose continued to try to live a life as a man, with predictably unhappy results.

Due to pressure to be as normal as possible, I ended up getting married to a girl I met at the church group who unknown to me was far more experienced than I was – I was a virgin, she not. At my request, she bought me my first pair of high heels, and I went to a fancy dress party with her, cross-dressed with water filled balloons as boobs – got roaring drunk, but something felt right (Rose's talk).

But it was not the pressure to be normal that appears to have spurred on her desire to transition. Quite the opposite: the pressure to be as normal as possible appears to have acted to postpone the decision to transition and led her to make poor choices, such as her first marriage. Unsurprisingly, this marriage did not last but shortly after it was over Rose tried again, this time marrying another white middle-class "girl down the road".

I went to cry on the girl down the road's shoulder, and ended up marrying her – this time around she went out of her way to catch me. We were married for 14 years. Bought a plot, built a house, had 2 children – 1 boy, then 1 girl, but it was a rocky ride. I constantly felt the urge to explore “my soft side” as I called it, while my wife was doing the best she could to limit and control it. We had a huge fight one night when I got dressed up in a lovely nightie and was waiting for her to come home from a school meeting she went to. She was livid that I got dressed while she was out – it should have only been once she was home she said! (Rose's talk).

Not only did her identity offend her wife's moral values, it also threatened her sexual identity.

It [sex] was partially satisfying but there was a role play of opposite gender roles and to some extent that led me to think that there was a chance that [she] would accept me and when I progressively showed that side of myself it was quite, quite a shock to me to be totally rejected at the end, you know. I was told quite clearly that she wasn't a lesbian (interview 1).

After an acrimonious divorce, they parted ways. The tone of this parting is captured in an anecdote she tells about her wife attempting to gain sole custody of their children on the grounds that “they must be protected from perverts like me”! As they say these days – EISH !!” (Rose's talk; Rose's emphasis).

During the divorce Rose became involved with a support group for transgender people – at the time this meant cross-dressers and transsexuals and was not, according to Rose's description, politicized. It was a place where, with one exception, a group of white male cross-dressers and transsexuals gathered to safely express aspects of themselves that they had to keep hidden in public. However, the group did not seem to bar black transsexuals, and certainly it did not bar coloured transsexuals; group

members took a risk in facilitating the attendance of a coloured member for instance. It convened in a suburb designated as white under the Group Areas Act and at times of day when black and coloured people would have been breaking curfew to attend. This was still apartheid South Africa and racially mixed social gatherings were risky.

In 1987 Rose had an orchidectomy, removing her testicles and effectively halting the production of testosterone. She chose the orchidectomy after a surgeon had refused her full sex reassignment surgery (SRS) on the grounds that she had children and was, according to his standards, insufficiently feminine. Although the orchidectomy was second prize Rose marks the date it took place as her birthday and takes pleasure in describing herself as being in her twenties as a result. In addition to the orchidectomy, Rose is on hormone therapy and has had electrolysis to permanently remove her facial hair. She was obliged to complete this process over a series of weekends as it left her face swollen with the evidence of a transition to which her employer and co-workers were already hostile – she was eventually obliged to quit her job as a result of this hostility.

The hormones Rose takes have caused significant breast growth, which has profoundly altered her experience of her body.

The expression that I have used in the past is [that] it was like trying to ride a tiger: I'd got off the tiger [...] when I went on the hormones and when I had the op, the two of those together, remember they happened fairly close in time together, that gave me a feeling that I was no longer chained to a body that was demanding that I act in a certain way, it gave me the peace that I'd wanted. So whereas female-to-male get kicked in the ass by the testosterone, I was no longer being kicked in the ass (interview 1).

That Rose could afford such procedures speaks to the point that other social positionings intersect to influence how transsexual people experience embodiment. Rose is a white woman, and would once have been perceived as a white man, in a country in which whiteness correlates strongly with class privilege, and this position has meant that she has had the funds and social mobility necessary in order to secure certain medical interventions which might not otherwise have been possible. These interventions – surgery, hormone therapy, and laser hair removal – means that her self-presentation together with her secondary sex characteristics (the absence of facial hair and the presence of breasts) meet the normative criteria for the gender “woman” to be easily and consistently assigned her in the social context in which she finds herself. In other words, she passes. For Rose, the significance of passing is the unqualified social recognition it secures her. It is worth noting that in transitioning from male to female Rose would have had to give up the not insignificant benefits – however morally opprobrious – of being perceived to be a white man. Of course she would have continued to benefit from her whiteness and her class privilege but there can be no doubt about the fact that the subtraction of a feasible claim to maleness would have affected the ease with which she moved through the world.

[...]this morning I had seven people here, I was running the photo chat group, not one of them knows, not a single one of them knows [...] So I'm in an environment where I am functioning, I am accepted totally at face value. That's on the one hand. Doesn't stop me still wishing that this body had a, was your body. If we could take my brain and swop brains I'd do it like that [she snaps her fingers] (interview 1)

However, social recognition alone is not sufficient; self-recognition – the extent to which the body matches one's gender identity and gendered body image – is equally important (Rubin, 2003: 11). The fact that Rose retains a penis has significant implications for self-

recognition and hence for sexual intimacy. Rose has not had a lover since her transition over two decades ago and this is partly a function of what it would mean for recognition – both self-recognition and inter-personal recognition (ibid)– if Rose were to reveal her body.

Being in an in-between state as I am, I sort of edit a lot of my responses. I think there's, there's an unconscious editing taking place that...I've got myself a position in society in life at the moment and I suppose the bottom line is I'm scared; I'm scared to prejudice the, the image that I've achieved, the position I've achieved, by revealing that I'm not complete as I want to be. I think I'm brutally honest enough to say that as I am I would not approach a man. As I *am* I *may* approach a woman, but would the woman want me? If she is a full-blown woman she won't be interested. If she's a lesbian she won't be interested. Or I think she won't. So therefore I don't approach. I just look and enjoy (interview 2).

Rose has adopted a pragmatic approach to this reality: she chooses not to disclose this fact to others though not out of any delusion or refusal to acknowledge the existence of a penis.

In an ideal world, she tells me, she would have completed the process of sex reassignment surgery by having had the full set of procedures for fashioning a vagina, clitoris and labia from the penis and scrotum. Instead, she has accepted her body as it is; as a pensioner she does not have the funds for further surgery, which is an example of the relationship between affluence and embodiment for better or for worse. However, she describes herself as content and when I ask her where she would like to be in five years' time, she replies, "Right here, looking at the view".

In some respects Rose's experience of embodiment reflects her social class, strongly correlated here with her race, and her concomitant educated-ness. She has been able to afford medical interventions to change her body but has had to accept the limited extent of these interventions precisely and perhaps only because of her limited affluence.

“At some point in my life I realized that it's very wrong to be wanting to be female”

Tamsin and I met in 2010 at a party to which Rose had invited me. The party was organized by Gender DynamiX (GDX) in preparation for Cape Town's annual Gay Pride march. Several men and women had gathered there to make banners for the GDX float. The rebellious mood of the gathering was captured by a placard that read “Suck my dick, while you still can!” Rose introduced us and we exchanged phone numbers together with promises to meet up. Shortly thereafter she agreed to participate in the research.

At the time of our interviews, Tamsin was pre-operative and in her early forties. When I last saw her, two years after the initial interview period, she had just begun hormone therapy, her face visible softened as a result. However, when we first met she did not yet pass, which was a significant issue for her:

[...] right now my desire is to be able to walk down into the shopping centre and not have everybody point fingers at me and laugh (interview ii: 24).

This desire notwithstanding, she has never experienced any antipathy towards her body. Like Rose, she adopts a strategic approach to it. Commenting on cases of transsexual women who self-castrate she offers the following analysis,

[...] my mind is not relating to my body, whereas the other person [the one who self-castrates] is saying my body is not relating to my mind. I still look at my penis now and I don't see it as disgusting. I tuck it away like when I'm in the bath. So if I didn't have it, like I fold it down, you know? I know this [penis] is kind of there but most of the time it's hidden, it's behind something so I deal with it. What I don't like is body hair and I'm lucky, my body hair is naturally quite light but over the last ten years it's become darker so what I do now is um try and thin it out with the scissors [...] (interview 2).

Tamsin is middle class and white. She is relatively affluent, owns a flat and goes sailing on the weekends. Like Rose she has a tertiary education and lived a significant portion of her life under apartheid, completing then mandatory national service in the army. Tamsin grew up in the deceptive quiet of conservative white middle-class suburbia in Johannesburg during the 1970s and the early 80s. Her mother was a housewife and her father a salesman. Her description of them as people is sparse. But she is compassionate about their ignorance in the face of what she frames as her atypical behaviour as a child and speculates that in today's world, they would have googled transsexuality and then sought support. Instead, she was raised as a boy.

As the middle child of three she recalls feeling overlooked; her brother had the social prestige bequeathed to a first born son and the novelty that often accompanies a first child, whilst her sister was the adored only-daughter. On the foundation of these recollections she has fashioned a tentative theory of her transsexuality, which reflects her thoughtful personality.

My theory is that my brother received "first born" love and my sister received "first daughter" love. My brother is three years older than me and my sister three years younger than me...My father seemed to love her in a different way because she was

female and cute. My brother seemed to be loved in a different way because everything he did was for the first time. Possibly I wanted to belong to this special love, so possibly I tried to become my sister (at that age my brother was far too senior to try and emulate) ...But this is my own side theory and I don't think I will ever be able to gauge its accuracy or power of defining my gender identity thoughts (email correspondence).

Tasmin begin filching and wearing her sister's clothes as a small child. When her preference for her sister's clothing was discovered by her parents it was met with predictable admonitions. Discovering her sister's dresses under Tamsin's bed, her mother would say to her, "So, you're up to your nonsense again?" These are words that Tamsin says she'll "take to my grave" (interview 2). Eventually she was asked by her parents if there was anything she wanted to talk about but she described feeling deeply ashamed and saying no. And that was where the matter was left.

By constantly breaking the conventions around gender, Tamsin developed an early and explicit awareness of them. In this way her experience certainly speaks to the ethnomethodological point about gender's rule-based character.

I was aware of the concept of "gender identity mismatch" at around the age of five – my mom found me in my sister's clothes and told me not to wear them because they were for girls, not boys. For some reason I wanted to be like my sister [...]. Because of the tone of my Mom's voice I knew it was wrong. So I felt I would need to learn this concept as a rule - similar to the young child that wants to play with their food even after the child has been taught that such manners are bad manners. Over time the rule was enforced by society's simple but many gender rules – boys play with trucks and guns and are dressed in blue and have short hair while girls play with dolls and tea sets and are dressed in pink and have long curly hair (and smell much nicer). Slowly I realized that the rule seemed natural to everybody but not to me. At the same time I learned that society

conforms and people not conforming are quickly ridiculed. I also wanted to please my parents. So the easier choice was to adapt and keep my feelings secret. This is where I learned to keep up a façade of normality (email correspondence).

Such recollections point to the irony of 'happy families': wanting to please their parents heightens the internal conflicts for transsexual children. These recollections also illustrate a transsexual child labouring to pass as the gender they are supposed to be as opposed to labouring to pass as the gender with which they would like to be identified, which is a dimension of transsexual behaviour that ethnomethodologically influenced work seldom pays heed to (see Connell, 2009).

Like Rose and most of the other respondents Tamsin enjoyed many activities as a child, both those ascribed to boys and those ascribed to girls. However, she was aware that her 'feminine' tastes were socially untoward.

You know at some point in my life I realized that it's very wrong to be wanting to be female, so I just said ok I want to please my parents so I'll be a boy then and so I kind of...and I also enjoyed boy things; I enjoyed guns and, you know, and cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians and stuff and I still do but then apparently a lot of women do as well but they were taught "uh-uh that's not for girls, here's a Barbie doll". I didn't have this urge to go and play with Barbie Dolls but I was a little bit jealous of my sister who was allowed to do that and have Tinkerbell stuff, do you know Tinkerbell? (interview 2).

Unlike Rose and others, Tamsin did not believe that she would automatically become anatomically female one day. Puberty heightened her awareness of her body and its difference from those of the girls in her peer group.

And that's when I started doing more because suddenly I'm not seeing a girl in my class as just a girl, I'm starting to see her becoming a woman and I'm wanting to become a woman. But before the age of about thirteen you're not really wearing heels or anything. And at that age a girl starts experimenting with makeup and heels and things and I want to do that as well. So it certainly started, you know, intensifying (interview 2).

Tamsin also began to take greater risks to express her identity, risks which often ended in humiliation.

And then one day I walked down the road when I was about, now I'd say seventeen or eighteen, and, I think I might have told you this story, but I knew nobody was home but the garden boy, the "boy", whatever, the gardener was there but he was in the back garden mowing the lawn, and by the time I'd got back he'd moved to the front lawn. Ja, so I knew three houses down I can go into that property and then jump over the walls and then come through the back door, but while I was doing that, and I did it quite successfully, my dad arrived in the front and then he opened the front door and went into the house and was probably making himself a sandwich at the back of the house in the kitchen and who comes prancing down the back lawn but David in his sister's clothes! And he was very upset and he was asking me if some pervert is coming to pick me up and this and that and I just, from this joy of being, you know, having just walked down the road, and I still remember what I was wearing, a white skirt and white shoes, and I think it was a white top, but you know I didn't have a wig then, and I had make-up on but probably not all that convincing, and my dad just...I remember the white bra because I was so ashamed of it, and also for being caught, that I didn't even take the bra off, I ripped it off. It was a heavy moment for me.

Adolescence was also significant in that it was during adolescence that Tamsin first encountered another transsexual woman. Her reaction was decidedly mixed.

Directly after matric I met “a woman” that had apparently had the operation – she was once a man! I was fascinated but kept my distance. By now I probably recognized the term transsexual. We were working as casual laborers at the OK during a union strike. We were teenage boys full of bravado and mocking laughs. I did not dare approach her because firstly she seemed to lead an odd lifestyle (now I know why – we tend to become alternative because of the way society views us and because working opportunities are scarce so we end up living on less money), she was older, but mostly because my association with her would expose me and my secret to my friends. One of my biggest regrets in life was not having the courage and conviction to approach her. I remember thinking, negatively, that this was somebody that had had a “sex change” – and was a little weird, but at the same time I identified with her. The latter experience of meeting an actual transsexual was far more powerful and meaningful than the high school realization of the “sex change” concept which seemed a concept as foreign as going to the moon (email correspondence).

During this period Tamsin began to devote herself to the social work of passing as the man she was supposed to be, taking up body-building to emphasise her masculinity. When I asked if she'd had the relatively common experience of parents who took 'corrective' measures such as sending their 'effeminate' sons to boxing or Rugby or boarding school she replied,

No, nobody tried to take corrective measures – except myself. I went to gym to build muscles, thought about taking up boxing. Probably because I was attracted to women and at that time, late 80's, a muscled body was considered attractive. But also because I was trying to overcome my perception of myself which was one of weakness. Despite having the muscles I still cross-dressed but only focused my eyes on the parts that looked feminine. My Dad was however pleased that I was filling out and taking on the appearance and attributes of manhood.

Over the years Tamsin went through a routine of dressing and then purging – burning or destroying all one’s gear– as her desire to transition waxed and waned. In this sample, three respondents reported such behaviour.

Tamsin had an unusually intellectual approach to her transition. She told me that she felt she needed to understand her transition intellectually before she could go through with it:

...four months ago I would have said I’m on my way to transitioning. Then I met this girl [name withheld] and suddenly I wanted to emphasize the masculine part to attract her, remember we were discussing this in the car just now? And um and *this strong desire to be Tamsin just sort of disappeared for that while*. Now that she’s been in Johannesburg for four months I, and I don’t have this desire for her, or the desire is not as strong, put it that way, then this feeling of needing to transition comes back. So on the one hand, I see myself transitioned, and on the other hand I see myself, I don’t know (interview 2; my emphasis).

Shortly before we met Tamsin had decided that she did indeed want to go through with surgery, after contemplating this option for a long time and so she began to do research on the internet. This is how she had come in contact with GDX and how we had occasion to meet at their Pride party. However, she remained cautious about transition, weighing her options.

The contact has been just initially googling transgender, whatever it is, and being in touch with X at Gender DynamiX, and she said go to this meeting at Triangle and I went to that meeting. It was two and a half years ago and I’ve probably attended eighty percent of the meetings. And I went there and I learnt to understand myself and that I actually grew up a man and I don’t mind being a guy, I’ve got this strong female presence

inside me and I'm trying to understand and to listen to other people to maybe bounce or reflect their stories onto me and see what's similar what's different and...I want to be very sure of myself before I change. I want to be able to answer questions, I don't want to just say I had this feeling. I'm quite scientific that way. I want to say, I want to make sure I'm not transitioning because I enjoy the party on a Saturday night, you know? (interview 2).

Tamsin works as an architect for a private firm. As an educated, employed person and a bond holder she is affluent compared to the majority of South Africans. However, she does not think of herself as well-off and her current income would certainly not allow her to access private medical care for sex reassignment surgery (SRS). As most of her business is secured through word of mouth referrals, she has legitimate anxieties about the impact her transition may have on her future economic security if it were to become common knowledge. When I asked Tamsin why she doesn't move to another firm post-transition, she replied "because I won't get clients" (interview 2). She understands that transitioning could cost her social security.

Although Tamsin is aware of the kind of socio-economic punishment to which she may be subjected should she transition, she is adamant that she means to go through with surgery and hormone therapy and has clearly given the matter of how to do so, so as not to find herself unemployed or socially isolated, a great deal of thought. Transition necessitates careful planning if Tamsin is not to be left in a position of reduced social and economic security. Such planning is also a luxury however, as transsexuals who are in the working class poor may give the matter as much thought as Tamsin has but to less avail.

[...] I could very easily go work for a big firm. I'm thinking of going to go work for either the City of Cape Town, get into their Town Planning department. It's just that they're all

not motivated people and I like to have motivated people around me. I could get a job with any one of these big corporations. And as soon as I'm in there and protected by law I can say I'm transitioning and you can't fire me, you know. And I don't see it as a bad thing it's just the only way I can survive. I mean as a private practitioner, you know, who's going to come to me? One or two, but not enough to survive (interview 2).

The potential social cost of the surgery is compounded by its financial cost and its cost to her one investment: her home.

I mean I know that if I want to have the operation done properly, when I say properly I mean in Thailand, I'm going to have to sell this apartment. That's another thing that drives me: my parents weren't wealthy and I don't want to get to my parents age and not own a property or have enough money (interview 2).

Although Tamsin could have the surgery done in South Africa, she doesn't trust the standard of public health care. That she can be discerning is a further reflection of a degree of economic privilege that not all transsexuals enjoy and of the fact that such social positions as class have a material impact on shaping transition and the experience of embodiment. This privilege however does not render her invulnerable.

Beyond the obvious financial concerns, love - and the very real possibility of its permanent absence in her life - is a serious consideration for Tamsin. In our first interview she told me that she often wonders about who will love her if she transitions. She has never been married, has no children, and when we first met she had just left a relationship. Although she has close relationships with her siblings and is optimistic that they will accept her decision, at the time of our interviews she had not yet told them and so she could not be sure of their reactions. Both her parents are dead.

When I asked Tamsin if her ex-lover, Lisa, knew that she was transsexual, she chuckled as she told me, “Ja, I bought clothes from her”. This is how they met. The relationship did not last however, partly because Lisa left for a job in another city but also because, as Tamsin puts it, “she liked the idea but then when she realised how serious it was she said no she wants a boyfriend, she doesn’t want a girlfriend” (interview 2). Tamsin is not socially isolated however. She has friends who know about her identity as a woman and has developed new networks within Cape Town’s middle class transgender and lesbian community. It is here, in the local lesbian night scene (small though it is) that she made her first unabashed outings into the world beyond her flat as Tamsin (and not under the more socially acceptable pretence of being a male cross-dresser). She assumes, however, that lesbian women think of her as a cross-dresser – in woman’s clothing, but still a man. Nevertheless she feels accepted by these women.

Tamsin spent much of our time together reflecting in an abstract fashion on her gender. But the nature of these reflections does not suggest a person who regards herself as sick. Rather, they reflect the demands of a keen intellect and an introspective nature.

“My ancestor was living through me because he is male”²

Tebogo and I met at a panel discussion of *Trans: transgender life stories from South Africa*. His own story featured in this anthology. Tebogo is black and from a middle class background. He is an activist, a sangoma, and, at the time of our interviews, worked as an outreach officer for GDX. As I had already read Tebogo’s story, our interview, whilst

² The title for Tebogo’s story is adapted from the title of his narrative in *Trans: transgender life stories from South Africa*.

covering some personal ground, focused on more overtly political questions about the category transgender itself. The data from his interview was therefore most useful to me in the analysis of how respondents relate to the category transgender and the normative load that it carries (a theme of the next chapter). To address gaps related to early childhood and adolescence, I have drawn from his first person account in *Trans*. I indicate where this is the case.

Tebogo's work for GDX includes providing support and information to transgender people and their loved ones and being an active presence in township communities raising awareness and hosting support groups for transgendered residents. He is politicized about the normative content of gender without being programmatic and offers a humorous running commentary on his remarks, occasionally pausing to qualify something he has said by noting that it may be sexist, or openly criticizing the inherent gender bias of a particular social practice. Perhaps because of the nature of his work and his political commitments as an activist, Tebogo insisted that I not use a pseudonym. He is "out" about his transition.

Now in his early twenties, Tebogo grew up in Soshanguve Township north of Pretoria. He was born in the late 1980s during a time of political turbulence in South Africa, not least in its townships. However, he did not describe his childhood as characterised by violent struggle and he was too young at the time to have been formally involved in anti-apartheid activism. His family was not nuclear and he was raised, together with his sister, by his mother. His description of his childhood suggests a sense of contented routine in a world that was scrutable and predictable. He describes the contentment of a sense of belonging.

My older sister and I were raised by my mother. We lived with my grandparents. I grew up knowing that I only had a mother, although I did have some kind of relationship with my father. I was well fed and dressed just like other children. I didn't get more than the other children. There was nothing fancy about me. I was an average child. Yes, I was content (Nkoana in Morgan et al, 2009: 119).

He describes no resistance or opposition from parents or relatives to his preferences for 'boy's' clothing and activities.

Like Rose, it was only at school going age that Tebogo began to experience his difference as a difficulty. At school he was obliged to participate in 'girl's activities' and wear the girl's uniform. He was often in trouble with his teachers as he disliked these gendered obligations and rebelled against them.

When I was in standard 5, I was elected as class prefect and had to represent the girls. I was not comfortable being a girl class prefect. I didn't see myself as a girl [...] Meetings concerning girl-related issues, such as the girls' toilets, would be discussed and I had to be involved. I didn't participate well in those gender-related issues, because I never played my part (ibid).

He also clashed perpetually with his teachers over the issue of the school uniform. They insisted he wear skirts; he consistently wore trousers. Only after the intervention of an enlightened uncle who negotiated with his teachers on his behalf was Tebogo given official permission to wear the boy's uniform (Nkoana in Morgan et al, 2009: 120). His account of his relatives' general response is that of acceptance. He does not say anything specific about his parents' response however.

Tebogo's coming-out was unusually smooth in terms of how his family and community responded to him, if compared to the experiences of some of the other respondents. He

attributes this to the fact that he presented 'as a boy' from childhood and to the fact his family and community recognized his calling to be a sangoma as a legitimate one. Many African communities have a by now well-documented cultural repertoire with which to normalize gender variance without erasing it or prohibiting it altogether (see, Morgan & Reid, 2003). However, Tebogo did not say whether the uncle who intervened on his behalf over the matter of school uniforms, did so on the basis of the perception that he, Tebogo, was a sangoma.

Tebogo: I think that helped me also to present as a boy from a very young age so they never saw it coming, you know? They expected it, something like that one can say. They expected it. They've always seen me as a boy and I've always expressed myself as a boy and I've always expressed myself as one until I started transitioning and being open and talking about it and it's like they were prepared to hear those kind of things because already they know.

Emma: Oh ok, so there wasn't that...?

Tebogo: ...a new thing or, there wasn't, there wasn't a negative. But I would say, you know, you don't know what other people's saying behind all that. But for me, direct for me, I've never experienced any kind of discrimination I would say, ja. I was at a pub and then I went to a man's toilet and then I was with the guys and then they were like ok howzit. So we are leaving the toilet, then I come out. They know. They're accepting it. So I think it's also how you respond to the people. If you are scared and you are not open about it they might treat you according to your response, according to your reaction (interview 1).

At around the age of twelve Tebogo began getting seriously ill, which was interpreted by a local traditional healer as an indication of a calling to be a sangoma. A few years later he began his training. According to Tebogo, sangomas are held to different

standards of behaviour so far as gender expression and sexual orientation are concerned and it is not uncommon for a sangoma to be openly homosexual or to have a non-normative gender identity and for this difference to be tolerated. This account is substantiated by anthropological studies of sexual and gender identities amongst sangomas (see Morgan & Reid, 2003).

Tebogo: [...] Most of homosexuals were sangomas

Emma: Really?

Tebogo: And the reason why they were homosexuals is because of the people that called them were either the opposite sex and wanting to receive something, you know, and that made them homosexuals. So the gay men who were having like an ancestor of a woman, you know. That woman is acting out, out of him and then now he will be attracted to a man because that woman wants a man.

Emma: So, so...?

Tebogo: So he's serving this person, this body's serving the internal ancestor to another man. So that's how they always had a reason and then because of ancestors

Emma: [Interrupting] so you can't go against the [calling]?

Tebogo: You cannot, you cannot. You will just accept it and allow it to happen. So most of sangomas actually have this, they're homosexuals, you know, most of, most of lesbians and gays are sangomas and in another, another people who are

Emma: [Interrupting] is there any...?

Tebogo: Pastors also, our pastors also, black pastors also do have a homosexual thing within them. So that has, it has a lot to do with spirituality, you know, there is a lot, sexuality, our sexuality's really around spirituality, most of us who are, who are gender variant or either homosexual, we do have a kind of a spirit within us.

Emma: Ok, so that's how it is understood.

Tebogo: That's how we were understood [...] Ja, it's a divine calling, exactly that! It's a divine calling and then they stop you from [inaudible] so you are not going to [be] limited; you can just cross gender.

Emma: So the rules are different then?

Tebogo: Different, the rules are different. Different, ja, we can cross and we are allowed to do what we are doing [...] (interview 1).

Like Rose, Tebogo was able to draw on cultural resources to make sense of his gender and subsequent transition, although *without* challenging heterosexual normativity, which prevails with a kind of qualified flexibility. As Tebogo (in Morgan et al, 2009: 119) puts it, "my ancestor was living through me" and since the ancestor was male Tebogo's sexual desire was directed at women. His family accepted him on a similar logic. "My family accepted me, because they could tell that perhaps my ancestors were making me play the role I played" (in Morgan et al, 2009: 121). This explanation, which leaves heterosexual norms intact, appears to be unproblematic for him. Like Rose, he had to account for his difference. So there seems to be a culturally designated space/realm of gendered and sexual "fluidity" which exists in tandem with the heterosexual norms. Anything other than the heterosexual can be culturally accommodated within this space: encompassed by the role and destiny of the sangoma.

Although Tebogo encountered various terms to describe alternative sex and gender identities as a child, including "lesbian" and "transie", the latter was the vernacular for intersexual, he never identified with any of them personally. He found himself attracted to other girls but never identified as lesbian because "they dressed like girls, and I wanted to wear trousers" (Nkoana in Morgan et al, 2009: 120). And as he was not

intersexual, the term “transie”, which is also a pejorative, was not appealing to him either.

Tebogo never hated or rejected his female body but, like the rest of the respondents, his feelings about his gender and his body intensified significantly with the onset of puberty.

When I was in standard 6 I started expressing my feelings. I could no longer suppress this thing: I preferred being male rather than female.

When his breasts began to develop he could no longer hide his anatomically female body so he invented a pseudonym for himself.

I realised that I didn't want people to know I was a girl – I was ashamed. But, on the other hand, my breasts were developing; that's when I came up with the name Doctor, so that people wouldn't associate my actions with my feminine name. My friends didn't approve of it (in Morgan et al, 2009: 120).

It was only in early adulthood that Tebogo discovered the possibility of a sex change.

There was once a programme on *The Oprah Show*. They were interviewing a guy who was born a female but then had a sex change in order to be male. I was stunned – to me that was a miracle [...] I remember thinking to myself that I ought to write a letter to Nelson Mandela, so that he could assist me financially to get a sex-change but fortunately I found out that it does exist in South Africa (in Morgan et al, 2009: 123).

Today, Tebogo is a post-operative man on hormone therapy. He has had a double mastectomy and passes easily. He has no plans to have a phalloplasty as he no longer recognizes his clitoris due to the effects that the hormones he takes have had on the appearance of his genitals. He tells me that his clitoris is now significantly enlarged.

...and you know also transgender people, it's not all who are comfortable like that, in their bodies, but it's also about how do you understand your body. Because me, I don't recognize my clitoris as a clitoris. [It] has grown to such a size that I am quite like, it's not, it's not a, a woman won't have that kind of a clitoris [...] my body actually reflects me, it's very much correct (interview 1).

Although he is not currently in a relationship, Tebogo's ability to recognize his body as his own means that sexual intimacy is not a problem for him.

I'm flat chested and I've got a very smart dick, so I'm a man. I take off my clothes; I have sex (interview 1).

Tebogo (interview 1) tells me,

You know even today when I was walking to work, I was actually thinking about the first day I took testosterone. It made me feel very happy, like everyone could see that I was getting the injection. It's...you know what, it never happened over the night that I could feel the actual...

Emma: How long does it take?

Tebogo: three months you would start seeing the changes and all that...

Emma: But besides, does it affect how you feel psychologically and emotionally?

Tebogo: It does. For me I mean it did. You know, before, before I was on to I was uh I was a very sad angry person and then I think I was very stereotyped, you know I was that kind of a person who was going like ok I want to be a man and I wanna be this kind of man and men don't cry and a man has to have a woman and a man has to have a house, a home, and you know all those kind of things, all of those stereotyped kind of things that's before I was transgendered...

Emma: ok, and now post...?

Tebogo: But after transgenering I realized that a man is just a human being, [inaudible] a human being who can have a different life from what he was. I think all of those things were just to prove to people that I can be a man that they want to see. So testosterone do change you mentally the way of thinking, because we are now comfortable remember you were not comfortable, you were thinking things that would fit you, you know, but not the things that you are kind of like comfortable in your own skin and kind of like living who you are, really, and your mind your mind will shift you will see things differently because of you are relaxing [...]

What is powerful, even extraordinary, about this excerpt is that it thoroughly challenges the assumptions implicit in much of the queer literature of the type reviewed in the previous chapter. Namely, that the desire to transition is not necessarily guided by hegemonic gender norms. Yes, Tebogo wants a penis, needs a penis to recognize his body as his own, however, consider how unusual his acceptance of his enlarged clitoris as a penis is, in a society which associates maleness and masculinity with the size of the penis, amongst other attributes, and which denigrates men with smaller penises through the misogynistic suggestion that they are effeminate. I would argue that Tebogo's satisfaction with his penis can plausibly be read as a contestation of hegemonic norms even if that is not directly or explicitly what lies beneath this satisfaction. Transsexuals do not *necessarily* re-inscribe dominant gendered norms of embodiment through their choices around bodily modifications and even when they do choose conventional interventions the meaning they ascribe to these is not necessarily heterosexually normative. Tebogo is exemplary of this.

Tebogo's story is also powerful testimony to the effects of wider social and cultural norms in shaping subjective experience. Cultural recognition as a sangoma allowed his family and other elders in his life to make sense of him, and accept him, as gender

ambiguous, so that his childhood experiences were not traumatic or turbulent in the ways of others whose families emphatically rejected or punished them. It's ironic, perhaps, that for all the moral conservatism often associated with African traditionalism, the cultural recognition of being a sangoma allowed Tebogo to have far more permissive and accommodating family and social milieu than any of the other respondents.

“I used to go to sleep every night and pray that I would wake up and be a girl the next morning”

Charlotte and I met at the birthday party of a mutual friend. She was wearing an impossibly short mini skirt and tight top with a deeply scooped neckline displaying a large surgically constructed cleavage. She has a bright, techni-coloured personality. She works for a local NGO and is involved in transgender rights activism.

Charlotte is white and grew up in a conservative middle-class Baptist family in the 1960; “No happy-clappy” she quipped, when I asked what conservative Baptism entailed. Like Rose and Tamsin, she was well into adulthood when apartheid came to its official end in the early 1990s. In this environment gender roles were clearly defined and vigilantly policed (see Vincent & Camminga, 2009) and Charlotte recalls receiving frequent admonitions of the “boys-don’t-cry” variety from both her parents, which left her feeling like a failure and constantly trying to approximate the appropriate norms. Like Rose, Charlotte was saddled with religious baggage that significantly complicated her experience of her identity and the extent to which she felt comfortable to come out to herself, let alone to others. Although in Rose’s case, this was also a resource.

As a young child Charlotte recalls praying that God would change her into a girl.

Well I used to go to sleep every night and pray that I would wake up and be a girl the next morning [...] I had the faith that it would actually happen (interview 1).

As Charlotte points out her desire for a change in sexed embodiment at this age was less about alienation from her own body and more about a strong identification with her sister and the failure of her parents to recognize her in the same way they did her sister. Here her narrative accords with the standard feminist version of the story: transsexual people desire a change of embodiment because society will not allow them to safely and freely express their gender if it does not 'match' their sexed embodiment. However, this interpretation will later be challenged by Charlotte's account.

Well I remember when I was about four, five years of age, it wasn't so much about my body, it was about how I felt in relation to my sister and my brother because here was my sister who was a girl and every time she got certain kinds of clothes or gifts or whatever it was I always desired to have those things and yet I was getting guy things, boy's things and I was inculturated [sic] to be a boy. And of course my parents kept on with this thing that "big boys don't cry" because I was very effeminate, I was very soft, I was very sensitive, very emotional, nothing like my brother. My brother was this fighter, this real boy's boy, daddy's boy, whatever you wanna call it, and I was the real little weakling softy. I was not the kind of boy that I was supposed to be or what they expected me to be and it was always a case of "you need to toughen up, you need to be strong, you need to be, ja, "big boys don't cry" kind of things, and as a result of that I suppressed a lot of the feelings. I tried to live up to what was expected of me. I tried to emulate my brother as much as possible (interview 2).

Connell's (2009) point that transsexuals spend as much time, if not more, studying and attempting to embody the norms of the gender they are supposed to be, is vividly

illustrated by Charlotte's recollections of her early life. It is evident that, like Tamsin, Rose, Alba, and Larry, Charlotte began, and for a long time persisted, in bringing the full force of her energies to bear on the project of passing as the gender she was expected to be by her family and later her peers.

The onset of sexual maturation intensified Charlotte's discomfort.

I was always competing with [my brother] and whatever he did I wanted to try and be the same and that basically went through until I started going into puberty and in puberty suddenly a lot of confusion arose when this thing down here kept on getting hard for reasons I couldn't understand. So of course that started resulting in a lot of conflict in my life and at the same time I started really taking notice of my sister and her clothing and realizing that I actually feel more comfortable in her clothes, and I used to borrow her clothes and I felt a lot more comfortable (interview 1).

After Charlotte's sister left for college, taking her wardrobe with her, Charlotte resorted to shoplifting.

So one day I was caught and I was taken to the manager of the shop's office and he asked me who am I stealing the clothes for and I said I, I don't know why or for what reason I just, I was completely honest with him and just said to him, "for myself". So anyway they phoned the police and they phoned my parents and they got hold of my parents and when my parents arrived there he said to them he's not gonna lay any charges against me on condition my parents take me to see a psychologist because I've got a serious problem [...] The next afternoon when I got home from school there lying on my bed was a book about the differences between boys and girls and about sex and sexuality and I was expected to read the book. So that was the way my parents dealt with it [...] I went and saw a psychologist for about seven or eight sessions. I don't think he had any understanding whatsoever of what transsexuality was, obviously that was in 1977, roundabout there [...] At the end of it he did say that what he thought the problem was,

was because I was in a boys only high-school, I went to boy scouts on Friday evenings, and very often the whole weekend I was within the boy scouts and the only interaction I ever had with girls was at church and then of course because it was such a conservative church – girls where there boys were there [points away from herself to indicate a division] and we weren't really allowed to interact because something might happen between males and females that was not supposed to happen, ja, so anyway, um, so he said that he thinks what the problem is, is that I don't have enough interaction with girls and that my parents need to organize something where I can meet more girls so that I can interact with them because he thinks that there is lack of interaction between me and girls. The funny thing is, is that up until my sister left to go to teachers training college I used to go and sit in my sister's room and have long chats to her for hours on end. I used to sit and watch her doing her make-up and getting dressed and all this kind of stuff and it felt like the most natural thing in the world and yet I couldn't get on with my brother (interview 1).

After graduating with a qualification in mechanical engineering Charlotte's life followed a conventional path: she joined the air force, met her future wife, Lindy, and married. Lindy was the first woman she had had a sexual relationship with. It was Lindy who introduced Charlotte to charismatic Christianity – today she describes herself as a “happy-clappy bappie”. It was Lindy who was her accomplice in the task of trying to ‘correct’ her gender. Charlotte told Lindy about her conflict around her gender and embodiment and they opted to interpret it as a sexual fetish, hoping that married life and regular sex would put paid to it.

Charlotte: [...] when we met I told her about what I was struggling with. I told her about the dressing up, I told her about some of the feelings or experiences that I had.

Emma: And how did she respond?

Charlotte: Well she didn't really say much about it. She advised me to go and speak to one of our spiritual advisors, which I did, and this spiritual advisor didn't really have any understanding or knowledge about it either and it was just a case of we will pray for you and you need to repent and confess and what have you and really [he] didn't understand. So anyway, I met my ex Lindy and we were just friends and during the course of our friendship obviously this thing had come out and I'd spoken to her about it. We then ended up in a relationship and we eventually got married. So she went into the marriage knowing that I had this thing

Emma: did you think that she maybe thought that you would change or that she would change?

Charlotte: Well ok what I think is, is for both of us we were naïve about the situation. I was thirty years old and I hadn't had sex with a woman, ok? So I think both of us were under the impression that this was purely a sexual issue and that as soon as I was involved in a normal um sexual relationship with a woman it would disappear because it was a sexual thing because obviously gender variance, gender deviance, whatever it is, is a sexual thing! It's about the body, it's about sex, so and that was what we understood at that stage (interview 1).

The marriage quickly disintegrated and, in a search to locate a name and an explanation for her feelings, Charlotte began researching the internet where she discovered the concept of transsexuality and the possibility of sex change.

...during the course of those years that I was married to her I think it started becoming more and more aware to me that this was not a sexual thing that this was, I , the more I time I spent with her the more I realized that this is actually the human that I was supposed to be. And, during the, about the last six months of our marriage I started doing research on the internet and that is when I started discovering more and more about myself and who I was and that I was not alone and that I wasn't this complete

freak and that I wasn't a deviant, that it is something which occurs all the time and is pretty normal and that there is something much more [inaudible] and the more and more I began to realize that the more and more my wife began to realize that she was seeing the changes in me and the one day she turned round to me and she said sorry but I'm not a lesbian I don't wanna be with another woman and I think that either you need to go and find psychological help to help you fix this problem we are in. So we separated and during that separation period obviously gave me a lot of opportunity to explore and find out more about myself and do a lot more research and obviously discovered who and what I really was (interview 1)

Interestingly, who and what Charlotte discovered she was, namely a transsexual, is not a name she embraces as an identity. The relevance of this point is explored fully in the following chapter. Today Charlotte is post-operative – having had a vaginoplasty, labioplasty, neocliteroplasty, and breast augmentation. She travelled to Thailand for her surgery where, in a surgery that she describes as “like peeling a banana”, her surgeon fashioned a vagina, labia, and clitoris out of her penis and scrotum. Such a set of medical procedures is expensive and this expense is compounded by the costs of travelling to and from Thailand. This is not the kind of package that a working class transsexual person would be able to afford. And in South Africa, with its correlation between race and class, it is *generally* also the kind of package that only white transsexuals would be able to access.

Charlotte is not satisfied with the results, however, and attributes the fact that she has been single since her divorce *in part* to preconceived ideas about what a vagina *should* look like and her ‘failure’ to embody that norm, which she says she derived through an obsession with pornography and exposure to the surgically manicured genitals of female porn stars.

Charlotte: Ok, I think to a large extent I also need to take some of the blame for why I haven't been in a relationship, for me I think I [sighs] I'm not totally comfortable with my body, my genitalia, ok, and this is part of my problem really because I have an obsession with pornography [...] I don't seem to have it now but I did have a problem with pornography at one time [...] the vagina's are perfect, especially when they have these close-ups of the vaginas [...] but now the problem is that in my mind that is what a vagina should look like and mine doesn't look like that (interview 1).

This certainly is a reflection of embodiment driven by an exposure to dominant norms. Like Rose she has not had a lover since her transition.

Socially, Charlotte has found acceptance amongst Cape Town's middle class, predominantly white, lesbian community. Although she comments that she has never felt accepted by members of this community *as a woman*.

I think part of the problem that happened with me is that before I transitioned and had my re-assignment surgery and all that kind of stuff I was very actively involved in the community. I was always going to the lesbian clubs I was always interacting with lesbians and all of them knew that I was a transsexual that I had a male body and basically that's how they got to know me. Then after I transitioned and I came back, or after I had my surgery, and I came back into the community, I was still a man even though I had surgery. In their understanding I was *still* a man. I was always a man even though I was dressing up as a woman and interacting with them as a woman and believed I was a woman and during that whole time they, they always treated me like I was, or kind of accepted me, I wouldn't say accepted me as a woman, they just accepted me and always treated me with respect and that kind of stuff but they've always understood or believed that I was just a man (interview 1).

The irony here is that even if an argument can be mounted that Charlotte is reinscribing hegemonic gender norms she is equally and more directly the object upon which others police dominant homonormative ones.

“I was going to show a man how to be a man”

Larry is a post-operative transsexual man in his early 50s. At the time that we met Larry had had a double mastectomy, a hysterectomy, had been on hormone therapy for a number of years and was on the waiting list for a phalloplasty at Groote Schuur hospital. He had already waited over a decade (and waited still) to receive an identity document that reflects his gender as male. Being without an identity document that correctly identifies him is a particularly difficult for Larry. He passes so seamlessly as a man that occasions on which he is requested to produce identification are likely to cause extreme consternation on the part of others and humiliation (if not worse) for Larry.

Larry grew up in Cape Town, as the daughter of coloured middle class parents both of whom worked full time, as a consequence of which he spent much of his time as a child with extended family. He says his family were deeply religious people and that their Christian beliefs vis-à-vis the body as god’s temple saddled him with profound guilt over his desire to change his body.

Larry has a sister and two brothers. He describes himself as always having been a tomboy and believed from an early age that his female body was a mistake he’d one day “put right”. But Larry always considered himself a boy; he never considered himself different to begin with.

I never really considered myself as different to start off with. I played with boys but that didn't seem to matter and people good-naturedly referred to me as a "tomboy". I always knew I was a boy with the wrong body and that to me was the same as someone born blind or deaf. No different from anyone else except for a small hiccup that needed to be put right through surgery if and when I could afford it (email correspondence).

Larry always had an antagonistic relationship to his female body, refusing to let his parents wash him as a child. To this day he keeps only a small mirror in his room, always positioned at face height. When I asked how he felt about his body as a child he replied,

Larry: I hated it. I always did.

Emma: Why?

Larry: it obviously wasn't what I wanted and it just didn't look right, it, it, you know you walk around with this idea about yourself and then you look in the mirror and you realize that that's not the truth.

[...]

Emma: Ok. How early is it that you remember feeling like that?

Larry: I've always been uncomfortable with my body, um.

Emma: you mean like [inaudible]?

Larry: well I wouldn't know from what age really, um, my mind doesn't go back to when I first felt it but I just know that I felt it. I think an early memory too is not wanting anyone else to look at my body [...] so at an early age I wouldn't want to be washed by my parents.

Emma: Ok, why didn't you want other people to look at your body?

Larry: Because it wasn't the body that I felt I should have had.

Emma: Ok. And what specifically did you feel was wrong?

Larry: Well obviously the, the main organs, especially the sexual organs. When my breasts started, and there wasn't much to speak about, but when that started, oh it was, it was like, you know, like I felt *betrayed*, um, and, and, oh god when that other curse started it was even worse [...] (interview 1; my emphasis).

As a young child Larry was molested by a relative, abuse which continued into adolescence and which he interprets as having had a significant relationship to his transsexuality.

Larry: [...] if anything, if, if I could blame, or not blame, sorry it's the wrong word to use, but I don't know of another word, but if ever anybody was going to say something made me transgendered then it would be that.

Emma: The sexual abuse?

Larry: yes, because I made up my mind that I was going to be the best guy there ever was and that I would know how to treat a woman.

Emma: Really?

Larry: I, I just think that I'd, I'd seen such a lot of abuse, not only with children but wives being abused and marriages breaking up because men are doing this and it always seemed to me that it was the guy who was doing something to the woman and I'd made up my mind first of all that nobody was going to do that to me again and secondly that I would never do that to anybody, that I was going to show a man how to be a man (interview 1).

Larry's abuser was an uncle and so Larry remained silent about the abuse, not telling his parents, for many years. Eventually he told his mother who applied for a court order to prevent the uncle from having any further contact with Larry.

Whether this interpretation, this search for causes, is a function of Larry's exposure to dominant ideas about why some people are transsexual – what 'causes' transsexuality, in other words – or whether this is how Larry always felt about this abuse and its relationship to his gender is impossible to tell. Based on what he says about his childhood it seems more likely that the misogyny of his community environment 'inspired' him to be a better man, than it made him want to be a man in the first place. Certainly his identification as male preceded the start of his being sexually abused.

Like Tebogo, Larry was not prevented by his parents from engaging in boy's games or dressing in boy's clothing. This made school particularly difficult for Larry because it was at school that, for the first time, he was obliged to wear the girl's uniform and behave like a 'girl'. He resisted these restrictions up to the last possible moment and he gives as an example of this the fact that he would pack his school uniform (a dress) in his bag and put it on only when he reached the school gates.

The onset of puberty intensified his discomfort with his body. During adolescence Larry's mother discovered that he was being sexually abused and took Larry to a lawyer to seek advice. It was in the lawyer's offices that Larry discovered the possibility of gender reassignment surgery.

Larry (interview 1): so, and even after I was put on the injection, it, it wasn't the same really, it still meant that you know I [menstruated] and something that was stopping it but it was still going to happen if I didn't, if I missed the injection once, it was that three month injection, if I missed once it would happen. So that is why when I met Rose, but

that was only in 1988, 1987, I met Rose, and Rose told me, oh! Actually before I met Rose, the lawyer my mother took me to, to get the court order, he was actually the one who said to me have you ever thought about having a sex change. I hadn't said a word. I hadn't said a word to this lawyer, we were sitting in this office [Emma: your mother wasn't?] no my mother was sitting there, he was sitting in the office, he was asking me about all this thing of my uncle and so on, he wrote and did whatever and then he asked my mother to leave the room and the minute my mother left the room he asked me. He was the one who really started me off thinking about it but I didn't know cause I still said to him it's the one thing I think about a lot, I said to him, but I don't know where to go or who to go to and we never discussed it again; I never even saw that lawyer again.

Emma: [interrupts] Was that the first time that you actually thought about it yourself or had you been thinking about it before?

Larry: I hadn't thought about it. I didn't think it could be done.

Emma: So you didn't know it was possible?

Larry: I didn't know it was possible

Emma: And how did you feel when he asked that?

Larry: Like the penny dropped

Emma: Really?

Larry: so I thought, like, god, that is what has been wrong with me; you know what I'm saying? These feelings that I've been having, the girls that I like; this is actually what it's all about!

But it would be years and several failed relationships, jobs lost on account of a battle with mental illness, and stints in mental hospitals, before Larry could act on this knowledge.

Larry has never married and the response of his partners to his contradictory embodiment has been the cause of the demise of more than one relationship.

And, [pause] but it's difficult to explain to someone who's been, who is a woman who has now been told, "Look, um, I have a female body but I'm not a female" and then she has to ask herself but who is she sleeping with? I mean my one girlfriend of seven, I mean she, we'd been living together for six, seven, years and she said to me eventually she can't handle it. She walks around with man during the day but she goes to bed with a woman (interview 1)

He works a part time job and lives in shared accommodation due to financial constraints and chronic illness. He has no children. Larry maintains good relationships with two of his siblings who have accepted him as he is – his brother Neil and his sister Pamela. His other brother, Daniel, refuses to allow his children to call Larry by his name, insisting that they refer to him by his female birth name. His relationship with his mother is a work in progress and seems to shift with her feelings about his transition, which never stray far from discomfort and the vain belief that one day Larry will change.

None of the men in Larry's commune know his story. Not even his closest friend Paul. On our first meeting Larry recounts fabricating an excuse not to invite Paul to his recent birthday party for fear that a relative would out him. This decision proved to be a prescient one as an aunt took it upon herself to "out" Larry by calling him by his birth name and using the feminine pronoun when referring to him during her speech. As a

consequence, Larry's privacy was violated in front of a large number of people who did not know his story and had previously received him, without qualifications, as a man. He told me he was grateful that Paul was not there.

When Larry and I last spoke he had just had his phalloplasty and received his identity document after waiting for both for over a decade.

"I think I went through a phase where I was denying myself my true identity and I needed to convince myself and everybody else that I'm a male"

Alba and I met at a T-Junction, a monthly social event held in Cape Town for gender variant people organized by GDX. It was the first time that Alba had socialized with other 'transsexual' men and women who were open about having transitioned. She was visibly nervous when she arrived. As the evening progressed she naturally became less reserved, although she remained just as soft-spoken. At the end of the evening the older members of the group sat with her and answered her questions, advising her on what lay ahead and sharing war stories – the humiliation and terror occasioned by obdurate officials at home affairs loudly refusing to use the correct pronoun, or of the equally loud and equally humiliating confusion of bank clerks at the mismatch between what they saw before them and what an identity document told them, lost lovers, lost jobs, the snail's pace of public health care, and other stories centred on the pains of transition. But they also shared the pleasures: a new sense of comfort within one's own skin, the flowering of confidence, the joy of being able to pass if one so chose, and so on. I took the opportunity to speak with her alone by asking for a lift home. At the end of the

drive I asked if I could call her to speak to her about a project I was doing on transsexual life experiences. She said yes and later agreed to participate. We had a total of three interviews together.

At the time that we met Alba was a pre-operative transsexual woman in her early forties. Passing was of particular concern to her. When I asked what mattered most to her, she replied,

Being seen as a woman at the moment. If I can carry myself positively as a woman and be seen by others as a woman, because I'm very conscious of how my, what you call the shadow, the five o'clock shadow? But I'm busy with laser hair removal and I'm getting rid of quite a bit of it. I've been for five sessions so it does a lot for my confidence (interview 1).

During the course of the interview period, which was spread over several months, she met with the medical and social services panel that facilitates the process of sex change assisted by the public health care system in South Africa and began hormone therapy and laser hair removal, had hair extensions semi-permanently attached to her scalp, and went for voice coaching to alter her pitch. Sometime after our interviews were over we had a telephone conversation in which she told me that she had finally had the breast augmentation surgery she wanted and that she would be going to Thailand in the New Year (2012) for sex reassignment surgery.

Born in 1970, Alba grew up in middle class neighbourhood in Cape Town. Like the other respondents, with the exception of Tebogo, she lived out a significant period of her life during apartheid. She was one of three children to coloured parents – a nuclear family – and remembers wanting to be a girl from an early age.

I first felt and wanted to be a girl when I was four years old. That's my earliest memory. I used to lie in bed at night and wish that I had this magical power to change myself into a girl and at the right time just change myself back into a boy so that I can fit in (interview 1).

Although Alba does not recall being told off for gender-inappropriate behaviour as a young child, she does recall being fearful of revealing her feelings to her parents. Like the other respondents her secrecy, even before she was told that her identification was 'wrong', indicates an intuitive understanding that hers was a difference for which she would be held to account.

I was too scared to mention anything to my parents because I suppose I was scared of being made fun of or told that I was silly, stupid, maybe even getting a hiding, who knows? So I was avoiding that and I had cousins, most of my cousins are girls, and I loved them all and I enjoyed playing with them; we used to play all the games in the street [inaudible] (interview 1).

Like Rose, Alba is also quick to point out that although she loved her girl cousins and loved playing with them, she was at ease with boys and enjoyed engaging in 'boy's' pursuits. Her narrative indicates that in her universes, as in Rose's, Tamsin's, Tebogo's, Charlotte's, and Larry's, a girl (this is how she saw herself) can like boy's pursuits and still be a girl (to herself, if not to others). In other words, her concept of femininity and masculinity is not uncomplicatedly heteronormative. Although she describes her parents teasing her taste for girl's games, she was never prevented from engaging in them. Alba describes a childhood spent in community with other children and playing, boys and girls together, when not at school, in the neighbourhood streets.

Throughout childhood, Alba managed to keep her nascent identity a secret, only once being discovered by a domestic worker (an indication of middleclass-ness) when she dressed herself in the clothing of one of her sister's dolls.

I think I was about four or five. My sister had a big doll. I wasn't small, the doll was big, so I put on the doll's dress and then our domestic worker, she walked into the room and she saw me with the dress on and she just asked what are you doing? I said nothing, and she walked out and that was the end of that. That was it. I don't know if she told my mother. That was it (interview 1).

When she was fourteen her mother discovered the women's underwear she kept hidden in her drawer.

Alba: My mom did find underwear in my drawer when I was younger. Now she feels that she should have picked up on the signs back then, so she feels a bit guilty.

Emma: Guilty for what?

Alba: That she didn't pick up on the signs and didn't do anything about it.

Emma: But what do you think she thinks she should have done? Encouraged you, or shut it down?

Alba: I really don't know, no, she would have sought professional help back then cause I was like fourteen. That was in eighty-four.

Emma: Whose underwear was in your drawer?

Alba: That was mine, that's what I bought.

Emma: Ok, so you bought underwear?

Alba: Yes, at fourteen I just walked into the store, waited till there was nobody at the check-out, grabbed the underwear and paid for it. I was very shy and nervous and

worried what the cashier might think. I just thought okay they'll just think I'm buying it for my girlfriend (interview 3).

Although she yearned to "change into a girl", Alba did not report any strong feelings of antipathy towards her body and dressing seems to have been a sufficient form of self-expression until early adulthood.

Like all of the study's respondents she recalls taking on some activities mostly for their value in underlining her masculinity. Like Tamsin, Alba took up body building, and, like Tamsin, she regrets having done so.

Alba: [...] I used to do body-building, yes, so, there's bulk in places that I don't want any more and to lose that it's difficult to get rid of the bulk.

Emma: Where is there bulk that you don't like?

Alba: Shoulders and biceps, triceps.

Emma: And why do you not like it?

Alba: Because for me it's very masculine, and ok there are women that do body-building, they do have athletic builds but for me I like a feminine build.

Emma: Ok, ok, can you describe a feminine build for me?

Alba: The typical hour glass-figure [smiles], a nice figure.

Emma: I definitely don't have a feminine build!

[Both laugh]

Alba: Ok, that is the ideal, you know, but I mean there is no right and wrong, we're all different and some women are naturally muscular and so [inaudible]

Emma: Naturally muscular?

Alba: Ja, but I don't like it, I don't like it anymore. I think I went through a phase where I was denying myself my true identity and I needed to convince myself and everybody else that I'm a male, which is why I did a lot of male dominant sports and the work that I'm in and all that kind of thing.

So, for a significant period, Alba was engaged in the very material labour of trying to pass as a boy or man and not as the girl or woman she knew herself to be (see Connell, 2010). Here one sees that although she has a normative ideal of femininity she does not hold it as an absolute; she recognizes that one can be a woman without being particularly feminine.

It was only as an adolescent that she discovered the possibility of sex change when she read an article about a transsexual Bond Girl.

I think it was only in my early teens when I read about, I think the first article I read it was about one of the bond girls. And then I thought okay there is a possibility to become a woman. It just wasn't my time. My time is now (interview 3).

The passing of time has been, in all of the narratives explored here, critical to the actualization of transition: eventually, as the years accumulate, a tipping point is reached, a sort of crisis where, if one is lucky, one emerges Phoenix-like from the ashes of one's former life. Towards the ends of adolescence Alba began to feel a sense of urgency about making a physical transition.

Alba: You see the thing is even though I wanted to be a girl I never thought that I'd ever go through with it. I just thought I must accept who I am because I'm not emotionally and psychologically strong enough. So I just accepted who I was. But obviously *as time went on the urge and need to be a woman just became stronger*.

Emma: Can you sort of think of events, I mean can you think of points in time where you really felt that becoming stronger? I mean I imagine it was quite a gradual thing?

Alba: Um, not so much during puberty, at the age of about nineteen, twenty, that's when I started cross-dressing [based on her previous account she started in childhood but the distinction here is about cross-dressing and then going out into public]. For me it was satisfactory to a point but it was only, it was short lived, I did it for phases. I'd do it like for a month or two [...] I did it for a month or two and, and then I'd get angry with myself because I'd say that this is not right I shouldn't be doing this and I'll dispose of the clothing, whatever I had that's associated with being a woman I'd get rid of everything and then a couple of months later that desire would come back and then I'd go out and get clothing again, whatever I needed, and it would go on and off like that all the time. It was a cycle which every time when that desire returned it was stronger than before, the need to be a woman was just more overwhelming. It was only in the beginning of this year at the age of forty that I felt that I can't anymore, *I'm playing with my life*, it's like a yo-yo and I need to stabilize ,you know, and get my life together (interview 2; my emphasis).

Alba's turning point came in her early forties.

I think it's where I work. I work at *X* and I've been there for about eleven and a half months, December it will be two years, there are absolutely beautiful women in *X* and I'd spend most of my time on the balcony or by the window watching the women and every woman that I see I will scrutinise her from head to toe. Not in a sexual manner, um, I look at her hair, her body, her build, her make-up, her clothing, what she wears, how she wears it, how she carries herself, and I don't think there is one day that went by when I didn't wish that I looked half as good as those women, so I always wished that I could look half as good as one of them. And, the more time spent at *X*, the more women I

see, the more I wanted to be one. It just made the desire greater and it just reached a point in March this year, 2010, that I needed to make the change.

Alba is twice divorced, single, and has never had children. Her living arrangements, at the time of our interviews, were unconventional but felicitous: she lived with her ex-wife, Renee, who has been a source of consistent emotional support and assistance to Alba. For example, Renee helped Alba to come out to her family.

So Renee was just trying to encourage me to tell them that day and my brother overheard and asked what was wrong and I said no nothing is wrong and she then tried to encourage me to [tell them] and then he overheard again and then he asked me to go outside but I still couldn't tell him because I just couldn't bring myself to tell them because I was scared. I didn't know how they were going to respond, whether they were going to tell me to just leave, disown me or whatever, and, Renee went home with me and she said do you know that you cannot leave it like that because they obviously know that something's wrong, and she asked if she could go and tell them, so I said ok you can tell them, and so she turned around, she went back, she told them, she came home, and she said to me that I should have been there because they were so accepting and understanding, but that was *that* day (interview 1).

Although she remains on speaking terms with all of her family, her coming out to them has been fraught for both her parents and herself. For Alba's father, the news represented a loss.

[...] a couple of weeks ago he actually phoned me to say that I will never be a father, so I don't know, or will never know what it is like for a father to learn that maybe his son is gay or something like that, and he feels that what I am doing is going overboard.

Her mother initially accepted her decision but has since begun to struggle with it. Nevertheless, she remains in contact with them.

At the time that we met, Alba was still employed by the city council as a fire fighter – an iconically masculine and masculinist job and one she was clearly passionate about but one which she also knew she would have to give up:

[...] it's a very rewarding job, very satisfying. I think I've been there about fifteen years, nicely fifteen, and, but I'm not going to continue with it (interview 2).

Alba anticipated that her colleagues would make her transition difficult for her. "I would be torn to pieces [...] they'll call me anything that they can think of to insult, humiliate, embarrass me", she tells me. She then illustrates her point by telling me a particularly harrowing story about a colleague who attempted suicide, failed, and was mocked by his male colleagues upon returning to work, his 'failure' framed as a lack of masculinity on his part. Unsurprisingly, Alba has resolved to leave and look for work elsewhere. Like Tamsin, the social stigma that accompanies transition in an aggressively patriarchal and heteronormative society like South Africa (which is not unique in having these characteristics obviously), has obliged her to think carefully about her economic security.

I'm prepared to do anything, so that I can keep my housing subsidy, my pension, and my medical aid because I that is very important, and to still have a salary at the end of the day.

The econometric data on transsexuality is sparse but the anecdotal evidence on the post-transition realities that face transsexual men and women suggest that transition can have an adverse effect on income and job security. This is particularly true for male-to-female transsexuals as transition, whilst not impacting on their actual skills, moves

them into the social category of woman, which correlates with a decrease in income of up to 1/3 (Schilt & Wiswall, 2008: 1). One can only imagine what Alba's life would be like amongst the other fire fighters post-transition – less respect, possible demotion, even if only in how she was treated, and quite conceivably being the target of her threatened male colleagues.

Lived experience as a challenge to existing theory

If examined in relation to existing feminist and queer theory, these narratives raise a number of issues worth reflecting on. Of course, the narratives do not just contest feminism or queer theory in any simple way – both schools have produced insightful theorizations that continue to explain the social workings of gender well. In some cases the material presented above powerfully confirms the insights of existing theory. For instance, the feminist ethnomethodological point that, having learned our gender, we are held accountable for conduct that diverges from the hegemonic norms is well taken in light of the material presented above (see West & Zimmerman, 1987). All of the respondents felt they had to account for themselves; this is particularly vividly illustrated by Rose and Tebogo's stories, which support the "accountable conduct" (ibid) hypothesis. However, given the fact that analyses of transsexuality tend to focus exclusively on how transsexuality confirms feminist and/or queer theory I wish to refocus the critical gaze on evidence that complicates existing theoretical narratives.

Firstly – and this is a general point rather than being a point about the adequacy of feminism or queer theory in the face of illuminating the social meaning of transsexual lives – although these narratives have some very important similarities they are also, and perhaps equally, characterised by their inherent heterogeneity. There is no *one*

story of the body, of family, of tastes, preferences, norms or anything else. Variety across narratives was typical: respondents had varying relationships to their bodies – some hostile, some more affectionate; they experienced varying reactions from significant others – some were accepted, others prayed for, and some rejected and humiliated by family members; as children and adolescents they varied from one another in terms of degrees of knowledge and information about the possibilities of altering their bodies in line with the gender in terms of which they recognised themselves and wanted to be identified. One of the most interesting areas of variance were the norms of sexed embodiment that seemed to guide what kinds of interventions they felt were necessary in order to recognize themselves as anatomically male or female. Some were content with relatively little surgery, relying instead on hormones and self-presentation; and others were adamant that they wanted and needed all of the possible medical interventions. In general the FtM men seemed to require fewer interventions than the MtF women quite possibly because, as both Larry and Rose pointed out to me, the presence of a beard tends to secure adequate recognition even if the body of the person with the beard is smaller and ‘softer’ looking than the average man, whereas even the presence of breasts will not secure recognition for an MtF if she has particularly broad shoulders or a pronounced jaw. In other words, this sample revealed an experience of the norms of gendered embodiment that was more exigent if one was male-bodied but female identified than the reverse. The heterogeneity of the experiences was also apparent in the contrast between familial responses to respondents: e.g. in Tebogo’s case, the familial acceptance of his ambiguity, in terms of the calling to be a sangoma, is striking and distinctive.

But there were also some striking similarities: nobody wanted recognition as inhabiting a space of gender ambiguity or fluidity; for everybody, this liminal space – psychologically as well as socially – was not where and how they wanted to spend their lives. ‘Transsexual’ they might have known themselves to be, but the question of their gender was a different matter. For all respondents puberty, and the physical changes that accompanied it, was fraught and escalated the experience of contradictory embodiment and the desire to make profound physical changes. Everyone, with the exception of Larry, laboured hard first to preserve the appearance of being the gender they were supposed to be, and then at establishing and preserving the gender with which they wished to be identified. All respondents seemed, like Alba, to have seen themselves prior to some form of transition as both already being men and women and as not yet fully being men and women. Fully being men and women was subject to having made a physical transition to whatever degree they felt was necessary. Thus paradoxically, they both are and are not their true selves prior to transition; finding which mirrors that made by Rubin’s 2003 study, *Self-made Men*.

There were also important similarities in terms of respondents’ social positioning. In this sample all respondents were located somewhere within the middle class – some more comfortably so than others. This meant a greater degree of privacy – particularly for white respondents who typically come from cultures in which a high degree of personal privacy is valued and normalized – than would presumably have been the case had the sample all come from a background in the working class poor. It also meant more stuff – toys, clothing, perfume, make-up etc. – with which to experiment. And it meant, for those who were most comfortable, being able to access medical interventions more easily and rapidly than would otherwise have been the case. This underscores the

question of class and its links to types of household structures which are nuclear – a higher proportion in middle class groups – and relatively affluent – with children having their own bedrooms – allowing the space and resources for privacy, and the bodily experimentation that goes with it.

In terms of how the themes speak to the literature, consider the feminist ethnomethodology of the type I discussed in the literature review, which are primarily interested in how transsexuals study the gender they wish to be recognized as in order to secure recognition. But this preoccupation obscures firstly the centrality of the experience of contradictory embodiment as well as missing the extent to which, for many if not all transsexual men and women, the focus of the gender work is, often for decades at a stretch, devoted to passing as the gender they are supposed to be and once they pass as the gender they identify with as they are then thrust into the task of preserving that categorization, a task which is intimately linked to an embodied practice of secrecy, which I discuss below (Connell, 2009: 107-108).

Another theme that emerges from this data is related to how respondents' lived experience speaks to the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID). Queer argues that transsexual narratives may be produced by the imperatives of the GID. Without the diagnosis of GID one cannot secure medical interventions; but to obtain a diagnosis of gender identity disorder one has to tell normative tales about knowing you were a girl/boy right from the beginning and with unwavering certainty (see Butler, 2004:81). But such tales were not the case amongst at least two of the respondents, Tamsin and Rose. Rose, for instance, was at pains to highlight evidence that would, normatively speaking, complicate the idea that she was a little girl stuck in the body of a little boy.

Rose insists that her childhood self was more complex than such a rendition would allow. And Tasmin goes through on-going cycles of wanting then not wanting to change – far from the persistency that the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* requires for the diagnosis of GID, which facilitates medically assisted transitions. On the other hand these contradictions demonstrate queer's point: the norms of the GID are static as a result of their artificiality (Butler, 2004:78-79). Furthermore, the kind of antipathy and uniform preference for the activities of the 'opposite' gender that popular culture and medical renditions of transsexuality lead one to expect are nowhere in evidence in these accounts. I am thinking here of two examples: *Silence of the Lambs'* Buffalo Bill, a putatively transsexual serial killer who fashions a women's exterior for himself out of the skins of his female victims; and the GID's transsexual child who "desire[s] to participate in the games and pastimes of girls" and rejects "stereotypical male toys, games, and activities" and displays a "persistent repudiation of male anatomical structures" (Walter Meyer et al, 2001: 5). All of the MtF respondents spoke about enjoying and engaging in a variety of gendered behaviours, and repudiation is far too strong a word to describe their relationships to their male bodies. Of the two FtM respondents, only one experienced strong antipathy towards his body, Larry.

Another important typicality is the extents to which respondents experienced puberty and the bodily changes that accompany it as a crisis. Relatedly, hormones and surgery often function to restore a peace that puberty destroyed. The emphasis on the "bodiliness of gendered crossings" (Prosser, 1998:6) evidenced by the impact of puberty does not sit comfortably in a corpus of theory that embraces the body as a text or a discursive effect but not a flux of biochemical reactions that must have some impact

of how we experience ourselves. What is also striking is the extent of the secrecy that passing – first as the externally imposed gender, then as the internally desired gender – engenders. The body is literally manipulated this way and that, first to keep the secret that its inhabitant is not really the gender he or she appears to be and then to protect him or her from the hostility, rejection, or withdrawal of recognition or what Rose referred to as “automatic full inclusion” (email correspondence) that might, and frequently does, attend knowledge of his or her birth sex.

As I have shown in the literature review, Butler’s queer theorization of transsexual lives – and those of theorists who follow her approach – tends to find transsexuality, and by extension transsexuals, problematic based on the assumption that transsexuality necessarily reinforces hegemonic norms of sexed embodiment by making transitions that begin in one sex in the binary of man/woman and end in the other (this is the difference that separates the transgender from the transsexual in queer literature) and further inscribe destructive normative links between gender, biology, and desire, by doing so. However – and here I think one sees the limitations to theoretical arguments that do not take stock of the empirical evidence – the evidence from this study suggests that norms that guide the physical transitions of these respondents are heterogeneous. Tebogo, for instance, needed far less intervention than Larry in order to be able to recognize his body as his own. Rose settled for an orchidectomy and the changes wrought by hormone therapy. But Alba was adamant that she needed all of the surgeries, augmentations, vocal and social interventions that are currently available in order to feel complete. Some transsexual people choose or are obliged by their circumstances to have some but not all of the available surgeries and some may choose to have hormone therapy without surgery or even opt to forgo both surgery and

hormones in favor of self-presentational methods. And sometimes such choices are compelled by the position of the person making them within the class structure (Elliot, 2009: 8). As was evident amongst this group of individuals, different people require different degrees of physical change in order to recognize themselves. This clarification is important because research on transsexuality often assumes that all transitions amongst those transsexuals who do wish to embody gender unambiguously are necessarily teleological. Not all the respondents in this study understood male and female embodiment in the same way – in part because of the socio-cultural resources available to them and how these affected familial responses and interventions. However, all respondents wanted some form of medical intervention to assist physical change, even if they did not want the entire package of interventions available.

The other variable that is interesting to reflect on is culture. Rose and Tebogo both drew on cultural repertoires to account for and in a sense normalize their difference. Rose drew on the Christian doctrine of the immortal soul to argue that her choice to transition was not, as the Church would have it, a sin, since it honoured the gender of her soul and altered only her body. And Tebogo had the repertoire of cultural norms around the gender and sexual preferences of traditional healers, or sangomas (see Morgan and Reid, 2003) – well-established in black circles in South Africa - to draw on in legitimizing his identification as a man and his sexual desire for women.

In the following chapter I move on to look at how respondents experienced and understood the designations ‘transsexual’ and ‘transgender’.

Chapter 5: A rose by any other name? How the men and women of this study understood and related to the terms ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual’

This chapter explores the extent to which respondents relate to the designations transsexual and transgender. The simple answer is that they do not relate to either transgender or transsexual as categories of personal identity. Indeed, as identities, they

reject them. This is one of the primary findings of this research. But in itself, it is incomplete, because although none of the respondents embraced transgender or transsexual, there were conditions and circumstances in which they recognised themselves as transgender or transsexual as a kind of strategic and situational identification (as opposed to an abiding identity). Unsurprisingly, any use of either term that they felt impugned their claim to being men or women, was rejected. Ultimately, no-one aspired to be transgender in the queer sense, i.e. in the sense of celebrating being difficult to ascribe gender to; all aspired to be recognizably one gender or the other within the binary frame of man/woman; yet the manner of the binary did not merely mimic dominant heterosexual norms. Moreover, participants did not respond as predicted by queer theory to the medicalization of their difference, and their gender politics were too complex to be described either as queer or heterosexually orthodox.

In this chapter I examine first how respondents understood and used the terms transgender and transsexual. I then look at how they experienced their bodies and the medicalization of their gender variance. Finally, I look at the gender politics that emerge from their accounts. Although aspects of the critique I make of queer theory take issue with the adequacy of queer in terms of its descriptive claims, the brunt of the critique, in this chapter, is of what I take to be queer's implicit normative stance; its judgment of those transsexuals who aspire to pass as a kind of symptom of the problem of heteronormativity. On my reading, queer theorists look askance at the more stable gender identities, which respondents such as these hold dear, but without a good objective basis for doing so. My critique looks at the merits of this judgement but also at the accuracy of the description queer theory makes of 'transsexual' men and women on which it bases its negative evaluation of "transsexuals" gender choices.

Given the political sophistication of some of the views offered by the study's respondents, it is worth reiterating the point that the men and women who participated in this study shared biographies characterised by political exposure and levels of education to which not all gender ambiguous people are party. Their remarkable self-reflexiveness is likely a function of their politicization and their articulateness is most certainly a function, in part, of their education.

"I will be a woman and not a TS or a TG"

Despite the strong activist presence in the sample, none of the respondents identified primarily as transgender or transsexual. Instead, all insisted they were men and women, often suggesting that to be called transgender or transsexual somehow impugned this claim. When respondents referred to themselves as transgender or transsexual, it was in the context of describing a specific stage in the process of transition from one sexed embodiment to another during which they did not yet pass as the gender they wished to be identified with. This was not a space in which they wished to live. They also used the terms strategically to signal an alliance or to account for their difference to others in their social orbit. However, the terms mostly functioned as temporal and temporary descriptors for respondents and not as categories of personal identity.

Tamsin (email correspondence), for example, was reticent about both terms.

I suppose I-am-what-I-am and the *term* is-what-it-is. I find it difficult to pretend that the word and the phenomenon does not exist... [Post-transition] I will be a woman and not a transsexual or a transgender...The label/term transgender implies *a long journey*, one

that is *never complete*...The transsexual is constantly being *reviewed* by all that *sees* him/her... (My emphasis).

To say, as Tamsin does, that one finds it difficult to pretend that something does not exist suggests at best a reticent acceptance of that something. Tamsin does not embrace the categories of transgender or transsexual or value them as self-descriptors. Her account does speak to an important point made by queer theory however. Queer theory is interested in the permanently unfinished character of sexual and gender identity—how one's gender is never complete or permanently secured because it depends on the constant recitation of the dominant norms (Butler, 1993). Tamsin's experience – one she dislikes – is of exactly that. Tamsin lives the insight that gender is normatively regulated perhaps more visibly and more painfully than others. However, Tamsin does not find joy in, or seek to exploit, this incompleteness and instability because it is harmful to her sense of herself as a woman; it places her claim to being a woman permanently in question, which is obviously psychologically disquieting but would also make life difficult in practical terms. Rather, Tamsin seeks to establish the stability implied by the category woman as against the instability suggested by her rendition (one queer theorists share) of the categories transgender and transsexual. However, unlike in queer theory, where transgender and transsexual are now often understood as mutually exclusive terms (see Prosser, 1998), Tamsin draws no distinction between them. Both transgender and transsexual function to describe the undesired destabilization and contestation of her claim to womanhood. Both terms are used by Tamsin as the binary opposite to man/woman. In other words, to be transgender *or* transsexual is, for Tamsin, to be the opposite of a woman or to fail to be a woman. Hence, once Tamsin passes as a woman, she will no longer be a transgender or a transsexual. As I read it, in queer theory, 'failure' to embody more conventional

masculinities or femininities is valued, whereas passing is frowned upon as a form of complicity with heteronormativity or an indication of false consciousness (e.g. Halberstam, 1998b: 289; 1998a: 156).

Tamsin was not alone in her rejection of transgender and transsexual as identities.

Larry, for instance, had this to say:

I don't want to be a transgender or be referred to as a transgender for the rest of my life.

I'm just a man (interview 2).

Charlotte and Alba both insisted that the identity that mattered to them and that they wished others to identify them with was that of woman. Charlotte preferred not to be identified as transgender at all, whilst Alba was happy to use the term to describe herself but for purposes that were clearly utilitarian.

Charlotte: *I'm a woman and all I wanna be is a woman* (interview 1; Charlotte's emphasis).

Although Alba uses transgender in reference to herself to explain her situation to others, she insists that she is "*a woman. That's it!*" (Interview 1; Alba's emphasis).

Notable too is the fact that most respondents used transgender and transsexual synonymously. As I have argued in the literature review chapter the distinction between transsexual and transgender is a politicized one in queer theory and is central to queer's claim to political radicalism (Elliot, 2009: 6-7). Transsexuals are thought to re-inscribe heteronormative gender conventions by establishing a degree of congruence between their gender identity and physical body through the mobilization of medical interventions and forms of self-presentation such as dress, mannerisms, and vocal pitch, all guided by heteronormative gender conventions (Elliot, 2009: 8). Transgenders, on

the other hand, are celebrated for their 'failure' to pass; a failure that is read as a success given that it threatens heterosexual gender norms by rendering the terms of heterosexual normativity visible and, at the same time, by making heterosexual genders and sexualities difficult to read. As I will show, although all of the respondents were familiar with the terms transgender and transsexual, and the majority either are or have been actively involved in transgender activism, none of them drew a politicized distinction between transgender and transsexual and many used the terms interchangeably. That respondents tended not to draw a distinction is significant precisely because such a distinction is central to the theory and activism which depends upon their experiences to illustrate its theoretical claims – queer theory, that is. Although most of the respondents are not versed in formal queer theory, their attitudes suggest that they would not 'buy' queer's differentiation between transgender and transsexual, and that formal queer theory would find them – the respondents – problematic. I say this on the grounds that there is no celebration for respondents of a 'failure' to pass and that every effort is made to pass although, as the data shows, what passing entails is, for these respondents, not necessarily, strictly, or uncomplicatedly heteronormative.

Rather than using transgender or transsexual as identity markers, Tamsin uses them as temporal terms. Transgender and transsexual mark the period of time during transition in which she is *unable* to pass as a woman or at least to go unnoticed and un-scrutinized. Transgender and transsexual, in Tamsin's account, functioned to describe a thoroughly unwanted period throughout which her identity as a woman is subject to constant scrutiny and is therefore perpetually vulnerable.

It would be far easier to label myself as lesbian. I could wear that badge comfortably. Or if I liked men I could "just be". The label/term transgender implies a long journey. One

that is never complete. A homosexual person can “come out” and cross over quite smoothly – it’s a quick and relatively painless process that remains invisible to the outsider. The transsexual is constantly being reviewed by all that sees him/her (so much more so for a MTF) (email correspondence).

The accuracy of Tamsin’s description of homosexual coming-out is obviously dubious – do the crossings of homosexual people actually remain invisible, for instance, as she asserts? However, her observation that she could “just be” if her sexual identity were homosexual suggests the extent of the social traction of the idea that there is a necessary relationship between gender and sexual identity – the idea that part of what makes a man a man is his desire for a woman and that homosexual men are therefore not men but women in male bodies (see Vincent & Camminga, 2009). Tamsin knows that if she were a gay man, her femininity would be ‘tolerated’ to the extent that it would be assumed to be a function of her homosexuality. The insights of queer theory are pertinent here because it is queer theory that has demonstrated the heterosexual normativity of the accepted relationships between particular genders and particular sexual orientations (see Butler, 2004:78-9). Tamsin’s experience would therefore be useful to queer in articulating that point. But the point for Tamsin is to establish what most of us take for granted: a coherent gender identity that feels authentic to us and that is safe from the constant social contestation that someone like Tamsin experiences as a matter of course.

I suppose once I transition, and can maybe pass, I will avoid the thought of the label – I will be a woman and not a transgender or a transsexual. Perhaps it [transgender/transsexual] is similar to telling a kid that is caught up in their fantasy of play that their actions are not real and never will be (email correspondence).

What is being rejected here is the suggestion that Tamsin herself is not, and cannot be, a woman. Ironically, Tamsin's ambivalence towards transgender/transsexual stems from the same ground as queer's celebration of transgender. Queer politics' central political plank is the undermining of the dominant heterosexual gender binary through the embodied contestation of its norms. Embodiments of gender that reveal that binary to be "a fantasy of play" as Tamsin puts it, and a thoroughly heteronormative affair, are therefore highly prized. But, for Tamsin, the comparison of her gender to "a fantasy of play" is pejorative because her goal is to be recognized without doubt or question as a woman. Tamsin clearly *doesn't want* a "playful" gender, just as others might not want a more recognisably stable one, or might embody a less normatively recognizable gender but want the benefits of broad social recognition for that gender nevertheless. Beneath Tamsin's reference to being patronized as delusional, one senses a strong need to have her gender identity recognized and socially legitimated.

The respondents of this study drew only one meaningful distinction between transgender and transsexual. Transsexual was more frequently associated with a condition and its medical treatment, and transgender was more frequently associated with or used to explain the phenomenon of cross-gender identification and to signal solidarity with different kinds of gender-variant people - though usually *without* the subversive intent celebrated by queer theory. Tebogo draws the kind of descriptive but not politicized (à la queer) distinction between transgender and transsexual that I have described above.

I see myself as a man who is transsexual and a transgender activist...I'm also a transsexual man because I have become what people will accept as man through medical help. In other words I enforced my sex characteristics to match my gender identity. I am a transgender activist...Anyone who does not fit into the stereotype of

gender is somehow transgender, hence many of the activists use the term transgender so that it does not exclude other folks who might be expressing their identity different from them (interview 1).

Transsexual describes Tebogo's path to social recognition as a man. Such a path must of necessity create a body that meets the normative requirements for a match, outwardly, between sex and gender as per mainstream gender norms. However, it would appear that for Tebogo there is no conflict between the normative content of his chosen path – how it is shaped by and reshapes or even re-entrenches existing norms about what a man must look like if he is to be accepted as a man– and his gender politics. The way Tebogo uses transgender – “anyone who does not fit the stereotype of gender is somehow transgender” – and the fact that he favours the inclusion of all who do not fit the stereotype within the rubric of the term, signals a commitment to struggle against all oppressive forms of gender normativity. This fits at least one version of what queer activism could be about (Butler, 2004: 7). *But*, and this is the important caveat, *Tebogo's version of this struggle does not trumpet the eradication of binary gender altogether*; rather, it is a struggle for a more supple gender order that could accommodate both the identities that heterosexuality makes possible *and* the identities that challenge the unquestioned and uncritical naturalization of heterosexual gender norms. This is a struggle, then, that opposes homonormativity as much as it does heteronormativity.

Tebogo could embrace the categories of transsexual and transgender to refer to himself because he does not accept either term as a qualification of his gender (which is most likely why he does not express the ambivalence or hostility towards it that some of the other respondents did).

Like Tebogo, Charlotte's use of transgender, though self-referential, was evidently tactical. When I described the radical political project of queer to her – my version thereof, in which part of the point is to publically confound gender binarism by insisting on being received as one's chosen gender irrespective of physical appearance or social behaviour (a goal to which I am not opposed) – she had this to say:

Ok, the only reason why some transpeople are in that position and do that is because society doesn't accept us and we need to fight for those particular rights, but the average person on the street, you don't walk around and deliberately go and in your face and in everybody's face say I'm a woman and you must accept me as a woman and, and for a transperson, for me myself even, I pass, I can get by, I'm an activist because I've chosen to be an activist, but first of all *I'm a woman and all I wanna be is a woman* and I want people to look at me and just think another woman. I don't want to stand out. I want to just be me. I just want to be a person (interview 2: Charlotte's emphasis).

The desire to be received as just "a person" hints at the extent to which the position of a woman like Charlotte, and other women like her, is a socially embattled one.

That Charlotte is an activist makes her position especially interesting. Whereas Anglo-American queer activism takes issue with the norms that make certain kinds of gender visibility dangerous, Charlotte's activism appears to be driven both by protecting those rights that visibly departing from the hegemonic norms endangers *and* by protecting the right to (re)embody oneself and do one's gender as one chooses, even according to more heterosexually normative styles – a similar politics to Tebogo's. However, it would be a mistake to analyse this activism as implicitly conservative, for Charlotte also values gender diversity because it makes categorization more complex, which in turn challenges us to widen the circle of social and legal inclusion within the category human.

...there is such a diversity of identities and orientations out there as far as sexual orientation or gender identity goes. In fact it becomes very, very difficult to start trying to put people into boxes, which is actually the best thing that could happen... (Interview 2).

Others are far more emphatic in their rejection of transgender and/or transsexual than Charlotte is. Larry, who is a post-operative FtM, having had a double mastectomy and a phalloplasty, is adamant that transgender and transsexual are purely strategic devices for him. He finds transgender as an identification of himself made by others to be insulting.

In my writings and my talks to positive-minded people I *admit* to be transgender *only* so that they know where I'm coming from. I present well enough so that it is not necessary for me to out myself. *I don't want to be a transgender* or be referred to as a transgender for the rest of my life. *I'm just a man*. I can tinker under the bonnet of a car and I can cook and do my laundry (I draw the line at ironing, though). *The same as any other (genetic) man*. Identifying as TG places me in a box that says I'm different, a freak of nature, almost as bad as being called mad or insane when you simply suffer from depression and see a psychiatrist (email correspondence; my emphasis).

For Larry, transgender is a means of accounting for his difference when he has to. The presence of a norm is suggested by the fact that Larry feels he needs to account for himself at all (see West & Zimmermann, 1987). Ironically, someone like Larry is required to account for himself not just within the heteronormative framework but also within the queer normative framework (e.g. Wilton, 2000). This kind of political double-bind for transsexual people is well-documented (see Coogan, 2006; Namaste, 2009; Rubin, 1998).

In my email correspondence with Rose, I asked, perhaps pretentiously, whether there was a “hierarchy of personal identities” for her and, if so, where transgender and transsexual fell within that hierarchy.

Hierarchy of identities - Interesting concept. Let's see - I had my adenoids out when I was a kid. I had my tonsils out. I had my appendix out. I passed my Matric exam. I had a hernia. I got married – twice. I got divorced – twice. I got children. I got an ex-wife. I had gender related surgery [...] I found myself. I am a transgendered woman. That is me. The other things happened to me [...] I am active in the community [lists activist groups]. I am fascinated by the origins of the universe, and the big bang. Some people that I relate to know my history, others do not. I only tell on a need-to-know basis. I do not know who knows and who does not. It is not a topic for discussion. I do not talk about my appendix op, or any other op. So - I was "born wrong, had it fixed" - next question? Does that help? (Email correspondence).

With obvious and thoughtful provocativeness, Rose likens talking about being transgender to talking about having her tonsils removed. This suggests that it is not only nobody's business or concern but also that it is no more defining of who she is than the fact that she has had her tonsils out. Transgender is used to describe the path she travelled to become visibly a woman. I would suggest that the best reading of this response is as a form of resistance to those who either treat Rose as exotic, or whom she perceives as doing so, or those who reduce her to the fact of her gender transition. Quite possibly this resistance is directed at me as the researcher and outsider to the experience of cross-gender identification and transition – asking an uninteresting and irrelevant question. Clearly Rose is stressing that there is far more to who she is than the fact that she has made a physical transition so as to make visible the gender she wishes to be identified with and which she identifies as. Thus it appears to be resistance

to a particular understanding of transgender and transsexuality as an unduly reductive identification, when made by others, and as a personal identity – one that trumps all others. The assertiveness of her tone in these excerpts also suggests an understandably deep sensitivity to the qualification of her womanhood.

As far as transgender is concerned, I do not IDENTIFY as transgender - it is something that has happened to me that allows some people in some communities to place me in a box labelled transgender that carries all of THEIR understanding of the term. I am "TRANS" only in as much as I have crossed a boundary, but [it is] not who I am. That was what I was trying to get at in my email by listing things that have happened to me. I am also "Appendix", having had mine out, but I sure do not identify as an Appendix. I IDENTIFY as Rose, as an interesting person of mature years, who has various interests. If people who like boxes want to put me in one, please put me in the box labelled "Granny". [...] we [Rose and a group of 'transsexual' women] discussed the way people react to one when they get to know you are trans, when they did not know that before, and took you at face value. We came to the conclusion that something precious was lost - we named it "Automatic full-inclusion". It means that a woman, who thinks you are a woman since birth, will treat you differently when she gets to know you used to be a man. You have lost the Automatic Full Inclusion in the sisterhood of Women. I want to be identified in the first group.

Rose, like Tamsin, identifies transgender as a finite stage; it is a temporary and temporal descriptor. One crosses from one gender location to another – a crossing that lasts for an indefinite length of time – and transgender describes both the period of crossing and the intended temporariness of it.

Alba expresses a warmer relationship to the category. However, it is still one that ultimately rejects transgender as a personal identity or a political project in the queer sense.

Emma: How do you feel about the term transgender?

Alba: *It doesn't bother me at all. I'm not affected by it. I actually use it as a term to explain myself.* When people ask why or how did it come about, then I tell them I am transgender. A lot of people surprise me, they actually knew [sic] what transgender is, some didn't know, and I enjoy explaining (my emphasis).

Emma: And how does it relate to your identity as a woman? Of those two identities is either one of them more important to you?

Alba: *I'm a woman. That's it!* (Interview 2; Alba's emphasis)

One can account for Alba's relationship to transgender, as compared to the more ambivalent relationships of other respondents, by examining what Alba *understands* transgender to mean and to do. For Alba, transgender has a similar function to what it does for Larry, Tebogo, and Charlotte: it is socially useful in the sense that it provides a means of accounting for one's difference when socially or politically required and organizing for one's rights. In contrast to Larry however, Alba is working with an understanding of this term that does not take issue with her claim to being a woman or pathologize it, whereas Larry seems to feel his claim to being a man demeaned by the appellations transgender or transsexual, hence Alba is able to embrace transgender for certain purposes whereas Larry rejects it completely.

On the face of it things seem clear: all of the respondents reject both transgender and transsexual as personal identities. There are, however, contextual factors that may have influenced these responses and that therefore need to be considered. Clearly, the

context of the rejection of transgender and transsexual is important: respondents reject these terms when they perceive them as a threat or an invalidation of their asserted identity as men and women. It is the invalidation that is being refused and not necessarily the political commitment to a future in which a wider range of gender expressions are possible and celebrated. In other words, one ought not to assume that this rejection is necessarily indicative of an outright or simple rejection of the values advanced by queer or feminist theory and activism. It seems possible to reject radical gender identities as a personal preference without rejecting a vision of the future in which radical identities - radical in the sense that they subvert the assumed naturalness of heterosexual identities - are safe to express. Of course, some respondents expressed more conservative gender norms but there was *nothing* to suggest that this was a necessary product of their transsexuality. Transsexuality as a lived experience, in other words, has no necessary connection to a particular politics. It may be accompanied by reactionary, liberal, conservative, or radical politics as was the case amongst the respondents of this sample.

Gender politics

The gender politics that supposedly inform and 'produce' transsexuality are the focus of influential queer theorisations of transsexuality (see Butler, 1993; 2004; Halberstam, 1998; 2005; Salamon, 2010). In essence, queer tends to describe these politics as either reactionary or indicative of false consciousness. What then were the gender politics of these respondents? The simple answer is that respondents' gender politics were what one might expect from many peoples' politics - complex and characterised by confluences and contradictions, sometimes feminists, according to *my* understanding of

feminism, and sometimes not. The way that respondents understood categories such as woman and man reflected this variety and complexity. Some of their collective conceptualization of the gender categories man and woman revealed astuteness as to the social workings of gender; some were naïve or essentialist. For instance,

Emma: [...] what is a woman for you, what makes a person a woman?

Charlotte (i: 36-7): [long pause] ok, you [long pause], I wouldn't say that necessarily it is the biology or the anatomy, I think being a woman is more to a certain extent a state of mind and I think it's more an emotional and a psychological state. If I just think of my own personal experiences, that I felt like I was a woman but I was in a male body, ok, then you would want to say, how do I know what a woman felt like [sighs, chuckles]? I think, I think it was a combination of things like I felt it was easier to get on with woman, I never identified with some of the things that men did. I could never understand why a man would pull away from a stop street and leave three inches of rubber on the tar...

Thus, for Charlotte, a woman is a combination of things: a state of mind, as well as a physical embodiment, an identification with femininity, *and* a dis-identification with the traits of a hegemonic masculinity. Charlotte was conscious of the norms at stake in particular constructions of femininity.

Ja, I think the thing is, is when you're trans and you, you, somehow or other deep *down inside you just know that there that this, that this body is wrong*, and it's not necessarily a thing of saying that well women do this and men do that [...] Obviously there are, you do those things because that is what society sees women do but you identify with what you're *feeling* down inside, you do *those* things. You will notice with a lot of trans women one of the things which, which really, and I did it myself, so I shouldn't judge them [chuckles], it's got to be the shortest mini-skirt, the highest heels, the long painted red nails [...] and you'll see with the transmen they've gotta be these mucho, rude, arrogant, male chauvinist pigs to be accepted as a man because they think that's what men are,

that's how men live, that that's a *real* man because a man's man is tough and strong and rude and arrogant and curses and... you just know that *deep down inside that there is this conflict. This body is not right.* So in order to try and comply with what's, well trying to get yourself feeling and fitting in with, with, what you *think* a woman should be like you start dressing in a certain way or to think how a man should feel, should be, you start acting in a certain way and I think, I always refer to the pendulum effect – you are here [gestures] male, and you want to think that you gotta be female so what you do is that you swing right to the opposite, to the extreme.

Charlotte does not believe that transition or the desire to transition is about insisting on particular norms of behaviour and she is clear that initially such norms might be slavishly embodied due to insecurities regarding passing, which she frames as insecurities about securing social recognition rather than due to a commitment to such norms.

In a discussion about the effects of hormone therapy Tebogo also elaborated a self-aware gender politics.

Tebogo: Ja, if I can talk about physical things I would think, you know, my skin changes. From being a soft skin it has become rough. You know, those are the small things that changes and then I also feel physical strength, I'm a very strong person I can, I can...

Emma: psychologically?

Tebogo: Ja, psychologically. I'm mentally fit. I think I'm mentally masculine, there are ways...there are different...I don't think like females anymore. I used to think like a female. Then I denied that I was thinking like a female but before testosterone I would say, I mean many people would say this is the same, I was thinking like a female and now I am thinking like a man and then

Emma: [interrupting] what's thinking like a man, describe that to me ...what is?

Tebogo: Thinking like a man, you know, eish! I...and that is also becoming very sexist
[chuckles]

Emma: no it's fine

Tebogo: that is very sexist of me!

Emma: I'm not judging. I just wanna know how you felt.

Tebogo: But, thinking like a man, you know, like I'm looking a way of doing things, how to communicate with other people. I can feel that I can communicate with you looking at you like straight but then I wouldn't like I would, you know, I would still have the thing of judging your condition [...] whereas now I just say it as it is then that is for me thinking like a man and then, now I've changed from being very talkative rather than observing so I'm kind of like looking....

Emma: so more almost still on the inside?

Tebogo: Ja, I was feeling very aggressive. But that was before [the hormones]

Emma: ok so it's actually made you less aggressive?

Tebogo: it made...but the thing is that it should make me bit aggressive. I think now I'm getting to understand the part of aggression that you're talking about, I think I'm physically less aggressive, but mentally I can still be aggressive [...] you know, I'm thinking, I'm thinking very calm I think. I'm thinking very calm and I take situations very calm but I can be very angry and take it out...

Tebogo's analysis of what it means to be a man and how hormone therapy has acted to masculinise him, contain some of the usual normative dimensions, e.g. men are aggressive, straight forward, clear thinkers, calm under pressure, unemotional, and so

forth. However, it is a very self-aware analysis and one that reveals that the peace that transition sometimes brings with it can actually shift gender behaviour in directions which serve feminist politics, a point also noted by Henry Rubin in his 2003 study of female-to-male transsexuals, *Self-made men*. For instance,

Tebogo (interview 1):...You know, before I was on [hormones] I was a very sad angry person and then I think I was very stereotyped, you know, I was that kind of a person who was going like ok I want to be a man, and I wanna be this kind of man, and men don't cry, and a man has to have a woman, and a man has to have a house, a home, and you know all those kind of things, all of those stereotyped kind of things. That's before I was transgendered...

Emma: ok, and now post?

Tebogo: But after transgenering I realized that a man is just a human being, [inaudible], a human being who can have a different life from what he was. I think all of those things were just to prove to people that I can be a man that they want to see. So testosterone does change you mentally, the way of thinking, because you are now comfortable. Remember you were not comfortable, you were thinking things that would fit you, you know, but not the things that you are kind of like comfortable in your own skin and kind of like living....

As Rubin (2003, 167) notes, men whose masculinity is threatened as a consequence of misrecognition, such as transsexual men, are more likely to “draw from hegemonic codes of masculine behaviour in order to secure recognition as a man”. Thus, transition, whilst following mainstream norms quite closely in some respects, sometimes brings people into a less heteronormative space vis-à-vis their gender expression. Tebogo's account seems to confirm this. Charlotte's account echoes Rubin's (2003) observation of transsexual men extending it to transsexual women: the more threatened their

identities as women become, the more hyperbolically stereotyped the gender behaviour of transsexual women is likely to be.

Of course, some respondents have more heterosexually normative gender politics than others.

Tamsin (interview 2): And having said that I ask all these questions not to butches but to effeminate gay men, I've asked them look, you, you, you like men and you act like a woman, why don't you become a woman? Oh they don't want, they have no desire to be a woman and then I asked them why then act in a female way? Well they just say well that's because of how they are, you know? So, it's unanswered questions. I can't answer that and I cannot really say other than what your average woman in your average society well, when I say average society, in this society that we live in, is going to consider feminine that's how I want to be. I've got this strong need in me in many different ways, sexually being submissive in a way, being pretty, being attractive.

What this should serve to indicate, above anything else, is that the fact of wanting to transition or having transitioned within the gender binary is not a good starting point for an interrogation of individual or group politics. We cannot know anything about whether a person has feminist convictions – let alone what sort of feminist convictions – simply by ascertaining whether or not they are transsexual.

How respondents experienced the medicalization of their difference

In what follows I explore how respondents experienced the medicalization of their difference through the diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID) and through exposure to popular 'scientific' representations of transsexuality. In order to access state-funded medical interventions in South Africa and elsewhere, one must be

diagnosed as having GID. But the diagnosis of GID is one that is highly politicized in queer circles and elsewhere, and is central to the normative judgements cast on transsexual people, as 'submission' to diagnosis is read as complicity with or surrender to heterosexual normativity. The take on diagnosis on the part of some of the respondents of this study however, would seem to complicate any notion of false consciousness or complicity ascribed to transsexual people. Consider, for instance, Charlotte's take on the GID:

Charlotte (interview 1): I'd prefer not to equate being a transgender or a transsexual with a disease ok but if you are suffering with headaches and you cannot find the solution to it then you go to the doctor...But now, in now being transgender, [it] is not necessarily a physiological pain, but it's an emotional and a psychological pain.

Charlotte establishes a relationship between the meaning of transgender or transsexual and a suffering that can be remedied. Equally significant is the fact that this comparison does not strike her as inherently pathologizing (a trend across participant responses). This is the antithesis of the feminist-queer take on the GID discussed in the literature review, which sees the medicalization of transgender and transsexuality as necessarily traumatizing for those exposed to diagnosis and medical interventions (see Butler, 2004; Wilchins, 2007; Winters, 2007). Doubtless there are people for whom diagnosis as 'transsexual' or 'transgender' is traumatic. However, the responses of the men and women who participated in this research attested to the fact that the medicalization of transsexuality/transgender is not *always* experienced or constructed as traumatizing or pathologizing.

Alba, for instance, understands the 'scientific evidence' of a biological basis for transsexuality as a validation of her experience.

Emma: [...] do you think that the biological body does have anything to do with being trans and if yes, why, or how?

Alba: I'm biologically transgender [...] Extensive research was done; they did an autopsy on a biologically female brain as well as that of a transgender woman and they found that part of the brain which is responsible for gender identification was very, very similar.

How Alba understands the science – rather than the accuracy of the science or the accuracy of her description of it– is what matters. Alba is as authentically a woman as a “biological woman” according to her rendition of the science. She is able to harness the discursive authority of the biological and the scientific to legitimize her claim to being a woman. The debate for politics is what the ramifications of this mobilization are. Does mobilizing such discourses further entrench oppressive norms or is their mobilization against their normative purpose actually a subversive move? For Alba, however, neither of these questions figures as a priority or a feature of her experience or motivations. She is concerned with securing social recognition of herself as a woman.

I have described the rejection of transgender and transsexual (as identity categories) as a function of the respondents' shared priority, which is to protect their gender from any kind of attack and secure the material requirements to make their lives safe and fulfilling, and to establish comfort within their own bodies and a sense of psychological well-being. Whether that attack takes the form of misrecognition or vociferous objection is neither here nor there in terms of how strongly respondents reacted to protect their gender. This rejection extends to all of the nomenclature, discourse, and 'scientific evidence' pertinent to transsexuality/transgender. *If* the GID or the hegemonic ideology of the biological body is viewed by respondents as an attack on

their claim to their gender, then, unsurprisingly, they will reject these. On the other hand, if a term or a piece of evidence is understood as legitimizing their identity as men or women, it will be embraced and/or deployed strategically precisely to protect that treasured identity.

The general take of respondents on the diagnosis of GID does not suggest trauma:

Tebogo: Me, I was actually relieved because someone identified that there is actually a difference. You know? Like you'll hurt me a lot if somebody will say no I don't see anything wrong with you. I think you just have to sort that out. So I was actually relieved and quite happy that I'm going to start my process and *somebody else also witnessed that my gender is actually correct, incorrect outside, ja.*

The diagnosis of GID is important to Tebogo for two reasons: first, the GID, as he understands it, gives a name to his experience of being different that does not blame him for that difference; second, once he has been named in this way he can begin his medical transition, which is clearly a high emotional and psychological priority. But the naming of that difference and his desire to change his body is not exhaustively produced by the diagnosis. All respondents expressed a wish to re-embody themselves at some point in childhood. Of course, the counter argument is that transsexuals articulate that memory because the diagnosis requires it and they, in turn, require the diagnosis to drive their transitions forward (Butler, 2004:81).

However, for Tebogo it would appear that the diagnosis of GID is no diagnosis at all, if diagnosis is defined as the identification and naming, and therefore also the production, of an illness. This is the definition on the basis of which queer analyses reasonably claim that the GID is a source of trauma, stigmatization and a mechanism of subjecting the psyches and bodies of gender variant people to the normalizing procedures of

heteronormativity (Butler, 2004: 76-78). I do not deny that the GID certainly can and continues to function like this. But what happens when the GID is not experienced or defined in this way, as is the case with Tebogo, by those to whom it is applied? Can these respondents and those who share their experience be said to be exercising agency? Or are they simply plotting a course through gender variance that is the product of the normative structure in which they find themselves? And is it reasonable to frame these options as dichotomous?

I argue that the dichotomy described above is false for the reason that it cannot accurately describe respondents' lived experiences. For instance, Tebogo is aware that the GID could be used to describe him as a sick man. He is equally aware that biological accounts of his difference may function in the same way, namely, to make an illness of his identification as a man; and yet he has found a certain comfort in the diagnosis of GID.

Emma: [...] there is a lot of feminist writing that is very, very anti biological explanations because they say that it's turning something which is human into kind of an illness and saying that your brain is 'different'. I mean how do you feel about that? Do you think that is the effect of biological explanations?

Tebogo: If there is a reason, if there've been done research I wouldn't turn against it.

Emma: so it doesn't bother you, it doesn't make you feel like someone's saying that you are sick?

Tebogo: No, I'm not gonna say that. I don't believe that I'm sick. I don't. I know that I'm not sick. I don't think the person who was doing the research was doing it to show people that I'm sick. I think even if that was the reason I think that it will prove to them that I'm not actually sick but I just somebody different, you know? [...] I wouldn't, I'm

not, I'm not offended by this diagnosis. Ja, I'm not. I'm not. I would just be offended to be recognized as, as someone who is having a disorder, ja because of I don't think this is a disorder to me. I think it is rather a different situation than the majority situation.

The version of the GID that Tebogo embraces is the one that facilitates his transition by recognizing his embodiment as contradictory and facilitating the resolution of this. Tebogo's GID offers a validation of his experience and route out of the deep psychic pain it entails. The rejected GID, and the rejected scientific evidence, is the GID that invalidates his sense of who he is or turns his sense of self into the symptom of an illness. Due to this distinction *of experience* it is possible for Tebogo to embrace the GID as a diagnosis (that validates his feelings and facilitates his transition) *and* reject it as a diagnosis that names his condition a disorder or illness. The rejection is therefore not a contradiction; it is mixed – as is his existential situation.

Like Tebogo, Charlotte is not traumatized by the biological account of the origins of her difference or by its medicalization.

Charlotte (interview 1): But for me, certainly, my own experience was it was a liberating revelation for me to realize that this was a physiological and biological condition, if I can put it that way...I struggled for many, many years to understand this conflict that was in me. I don't know if you've ever watched our digital stories? [...] And I, my one is that one called "I am", where the religious conflict in my life comes in. It was really, really, really a struggle for me trying to find a solution to why or what I was and why I was feeling what I was feeling cause I knew that I was female but I was in a male body and it was a serious conflict for my religious background I thought that it was a religious thing and I fought it and fought it trying to find a sin that I could confess and repent of, which, that would fix me, and eventually via doing some searches on the internet I met some people and one of the people referred me to two books...can't remember the authors now...but I read

these two books and suddenly for the first time I realized that this is very possibly a physiological condition and therefore there is nothing for me to confess and repent and that it's something that I have no control over who I am and what I am but I do have control over how I'm going to remain or not remain and that I can do something about bringing my body into alignment with who I feel I am and it certainly was a liberating revelation to me and it set me free, the anxiety, the confusion, the doubt, the depression, the suicide attempts, everything, became, ja, it was a thing of the past. All that stuff.

Emma: so would you say that it was a feeling of, the emotions attached to that realization were...

Charlotte: they were really liberating.

The result of discovering the biological account of her difference was the polar opposite of traumatizing. It shifted her responsibility from trying to act against herself to a duty to act for herself. It transformed her choice to seek out the necessary interventions into an act of agency that restored her dignity by honouring her sense of self.

Respondents' understandings of the politics of these kinds of explanations are not unsophisticated. They do not fail to understand what is at stake in claiming a biological 'cause' for transsexuality. Charlotte, a post-operative woman and activist, is a good example of this.

Charlotte (interview 1): the [political] left would say "it's biological therefore you must accept it". That this is the reality and this is why these people are like that. On the right they would say "it's biological therefore how can we fix it", what can we do to make this right, or prevent it in the future.

Making sense of his experience with reference to scientific explanations does not extend to gender essentialism on Larry's part.

Emma: I'm just thinking, I mean I'm curious, like in your opinion, obviously as non-medical experts or whatever, do you think that there is anything biological about transgender or about gender identity? Our feeling of who we are, is any kind of a biological...?

Larry: you know a study has just been done where it's been they've proved that the certain sections of the brain or some substances of the brain in a transgendered person FTM is exactly the same as in a genetic female [...]

Emma: Ok, and you don't feel that there's anything, problematic about saying that that gender, that there's something biological about gender? No right answer here, I'm just asking for you personally.

Larry: Ja I, well in my case anyway. I firmly believe that there was some mess up at birth or not at birth at development inside the womb, that, for whatever reason the gods played a trick on me, that I actually, that I'm actually male biologically.

Emma: An anatomical female?

Larry: Ja, that it be a deformity rather than...

What Larry embraces is an account of how his suffering as caused by a mistake of biology. But, as I showed above, he is steadfast in his pointed rejection of the idea that this mistake makes him sick. In fact, he associates pathologization with the term transgender, and not with the diagnosis of GID.

Biology, the GID and the general medicalization of their 'difference' are not contaminated categories or procedures for these respondents in the same way that they are in queer theory and to queer transgender activists (see, e.g., Butler, 2004; Wilchins, 1997b; Winters, 2007). The GID and one's position on it is a hugely contentious issue. Queer theory and queer transgender activism of the kind that I have described opposes

its inclusion in the DSM (see, e.g., Butler, 2004; Wilchins, 2007; Winters, 2007). Transsexual activists, knowing from experience what is at stake in its exclusion, lobby for it, though not because they regard themselves as sick or deficient in any way (see, e.g., O'Hartigan, 2007). The reason for its rejection of the GID by queer theorists is that it may be used as a way of regulating and maintaining heterosexual norms. According to Butler, for instance, "To be diagnosed with gender identity disorder (GID) is to be found, in some way, to be ill, sick, wrong, out of order, abnormal, and to suffer a certain stigmatization as a consequence of the diagnosis being given at all" (Butler, 2004: 76).

Queer argues that the GID pathologizes certain gendering and sexual orientation not on the basis of inert biological facts (although it gains great traction precisely by its association with medical and biological sciences) but on the basis of social norms that are oppressive and doubly outrageous because of the fact that they are wrongly described as 'facts' and situated as impossible to change all with grave implications for anyone who cannot or does not want to do their gender according to these norms. The GID can also function as a covert way of correcting homosexuality by, again guided by heterosexual norms, facilitating the changing the body to 'fit' the gender expression of an individual (Butler, 2004: 78-9). However, some respondents experienced diagnosis as a kind of liberation. This demonstrates that the GID, and the processes and procedures of medicalization associated with it, are not universally traumatic and neither is their meaning at the level of lived experience. How respondents felt about both the category transgender and the medicalization of their experiences was determined by what they understood the term and the associated diagnosis to mean. Inasmuch as the category and medical model were understood to legitimize their experiences and choices, they embraced both. It was not uncommon for instance for the

same respondent to both and embrace and reject bio-medical models of transsexuality by turns at different points in the same interview depending on how I invoked these.

For example, the version of the GID that Larry rejects is the one that de-legitimizes his claim to being a man, distinguishes him from men who are biologically male, finds him deficient by comparison, and turns his masculinity into an illness. He is unperturbed however by 'scientific' explanations for his gender identity precisely because he understands such explanations to offer his experience legitimacy. Clearly respondents do see a correlation between sex characteristics and gender – in other words, men have penises and women vaginas – but I would suggest that, as evidenced by the thoughts of respondents such as Tebogo, one can hold this conviction as based on one's own personal experience and as a truth pertaining to oneself and guiding one's own choices without holding it as a norm to which others *ought* to conform.

How respondents experienced their physical bodies in relation to their gender identities

Being a man or a woman, for all respondents, had a very important relationship to the appearance of their physical bodies – as viewed by them and others.

Tebogo (i: 30): and you know also transgender people, it's not all who are comfortable like that, in their bodies, but it's also about how do you understand your body. Because me, I don't recognize my clitoris as a clitoris. [It] has grown to such a size that I am quite like, it's not, it's not a, a woman won't have that kind of a clitoris.

Self-recognition has an important relationship to the need to transition in that recognition is not only established inter-subjectively but also intra-subjectively (Benjamin, 1988; Rubin, 2003). This means that any given person needs other people to

recognize them (in this case as the gender with which they identify), but that they also need to be able to recognize themselves and, for a 'transsexual' man or woman, that entails having a body that aligns with their gendered sense of self – this is likely true for most non-transsexual people too, but being transsexual makes this visible. Tebogo does not express a desire for a phalloplasty because he no longer recognizes his clitoris as a clitoris; whereas Rose described herself as ready to jump at the opportunity to put her brain into the body of a biologically female woman even though no one in her social circle misrecognizes her.

Rose (interview 2): Let me stop you right there. This morning I had seven people here, I was running the photo chat group. Not one of them knows. Not a single one of them knows; when I'm on the list now I'm actually vice chairperson, automatically to become chairperson next year. Nobody knows. So I'm in an environment where I am functioning I am accepted totally at face value, that's on the one hand. Doesn't stop me still wishing that this body was your body. If we could take my brain and swop brains I'd do it like that [snaps fingers]

Emma: Really?

Rose: Yes! To take my brain into your body and you can have mine, fine. If they could do it I would be straight there tomorrow.

For many, physical transition was critical not so much to being their gender, as all were insistent that even without surgery they were the men and women they called themselves, but to getting that gender recognized more broadly.

Alba: It's definitely not enough. Dressing is just make-up basically. Um, but one needs to feel that your body is a woman's body. So I feel that I therefore need to do my surgery so that I can feel like an actual woman rather than using padded bras or balloons or socks or whatever. Even though I dressed up and looked kind of ok, I could pass as a woman,

not very well, but it was ok from a distance, I wanted to look like a woman up close and people must look and see that there's no mistake that is a woman you know and she's got breasts and she's voluptuous, she's got curves and everything. So yes, that's it.

This need to secure recognition was not driven only by social concerns.

Emma: [...] If you could be recognized as a woman without changing anything about your physical body, would that be satisfying to you?

Alba: No. No.

Emma: Why?

Alba: I need to change my body.

Emma: but why do you need to change your body?

Alba: because I feel like my body is not complete because I've got a penis and I have hair on my face and I don't have breasts a substantial size.

For Tebogo, bodily changes were necessitated by a need to feel that one's body is one's own more than by a need to secure the recognition of one's gender by others.

Tebogo (interview 1): Ah, I don't care a lot about clothes; I can even wear female clothes. I can wear my [inaudible] and I'll be happy I'll be a man with those [names an item of clothing, not audible] but I don't have a problem with clothes, I don't have a problem with how I sit, or how I look, or way of passing, no, but what I am conscious about is I don't want breasts, I don't want a vagina, I don't want periods.

Emma: you've had your top?

Tebogo: ja, I've had my top. I had my top and I removed some of the things bottom. I had both, you know, so I've started, so I think the two will be different hundred percent [inaudible] so, ja.

Emma: how do you feel in contexts like where you are making love, do you feel comfortable being seen by your partner because I know some people don't want

Tebogo: no me I don't have a problem, *me my body actually reflects me*, it's very much correct. I'm flat chested and I've got a very smart dick, so, I'm a man. I take off my clothes, I have sex.

Tamsin also felt the need to make certain physical changes although she did not experience antagonism towards her body either.

Tamsin (interview 2): I suppose we're saying the same thing, my mind is not relating to my body, whereas the other person is saying my body is not relating to my mind. I still look at my penis now and I don't see it as disgusting. I tuck it away like when I'm in the bath. So if I didn't have it, like I fold it down, you know this I know is kind of there but most of the time it's hidden, it's behind something so I deal with it. What I don't like is body hair and I'm lucky, my body hair is naturally quite light but over the last ten years it's become darker so what I do now is um try and thin it out with the scissors and then um.

Emma: So that hasn't changed. You still have a similar relationship to your body as you did as a kid.

Tamsin: Ja, it's my body. I mean I, I'm not, I understand that I've got um a lot of testosterone in me that's why I haven't developed breasts and haven't, you know, I'm biologically male so I didn't develop the pelvis like a woman has and that I just accept, I don't pretend it's not me and ignore it and rebel against it. I work with it. Um, you know, those things you can't really change, you can't change the size of your pelvis, and so, ja, no but my body's, I'm very happy with it. You know at a time I did body building cause I, um, I was trying to prove that I was male enough.

The very process of transition itself has led some respondents to come to a deeper awareness of gender normativity and to question it, but this did not shift the longing to transition.

It is clear that the respondents of this particular study did not embrace an identity as transsexual or transgender. Moreover, they used these categories in binary opposition to those of man/woman. In respect of their own identities, they sought to embody the categories of man or woman unambiguously – and yet their versions of unambiguous masculinity or femininity were not uncomplicatedly heteronormative or teleological. Unlike queer theory's transgenders, none perceived themselves to be engaged in a struggle to undermine heterosexual binary gender altogether (see, e.g., Feinberg, 1992). And their transitions did not take shape with political ends in mind. This meant that, to one degree or another, either through behaviour, dress, or physical embodiment, they conformed *in some respects*, whether by design or necessity, to hegemonic gender norms. However, the terms of their refusal or embrace of the categories transgender/transsexual and man/woman were complex. Firstly, transgender and transsexual were refused as personal identities because they were perceived to invalidate what was most important to all respondents: unqualified recognition as men and women. However, respondents did not shut these down as options for others, and most embraced them implicitly through a connection to or active involvement in the Cape Town transgender rights movement. Those who were activists struggled to make positions within and indeed outside of gender binary accessible and liveable to all. In their descriptions of what constituted being a man/woman, few subscribed neatly to

heterosexual normativity. The key point is that their position was neither queer nor a simple mimicry of heterosexual orthodoxy.

Respondents also did not respond as predicted in the queer literature to the medicalization of their difference. So, for instance, the diagnosis of GID was not a moment of trauma for any of them. Moreover, they drew on the scientific 'evidence' fluently, regularly and without antagonism to it provided that it validated their experience and gender identity claims. For instance, for these respondents, the GID and biological vocabulary were liberatory. In queer theory neither is imagined to have that potential (see Butler, 2004). Moreover, they rejected any suggestion that they were ill even while some framed their circumstances as the result of a genetic abnormality. Their predicament was remediable (not unlike an illness) but the remedy, it turned out, was not so much to fix them, and certainly not to cure them, as it was to actualize their gender. In this way one cannot argue that they endorse a pathologizing version of the GID; at the same time, the position they take – which asserts a kind of link between biology, anatomy, and gender – is not a queer one. Queer, by contrast, values the category transgender for its potential to undermine binary gender altogether. Transsexuals are positioned by queer theory as entrenching the naturalization of the sex-gender link (see Hausman, 1995; Wilton, 2003), according to which gender is thought to flow from sex but also to be fixed to it. Thus, for queer, the invocation of biology, connected as it is to the naturalization of that link, is a thoroughly rejected one (Butler, 1990). The GID, with a documented use as a 'corrective' to homosexuality, is likewise rejected (Butler, 2004).

Chapter 6: Concluding remarks: Neither queer nor heterosexually orthodox

This dissertation began with the question of how a small sample of 'transsexual' men and women, living in Cape Town, experience and relate to the terms used to designate them by activists and intellectuals – 'transsexual' and 'transgender'. It sought to investigate the strength of the theoretical claims of feminism and queer theory vis-à-vis this form of gender variance when compared to the findings of empirical research. It interrogated the analytical adequacy of the term transgender – so celebrated in queer theory – as a means of unlocking the nature of transsexual subjectivities. Through an exploration of the empirical data, it interrogated the normative position that queer theorists tend to take on transsexuality, i.e. that transsexual subjectivities are produced by hegemonic gender discourses and that the desire to establish congruence between gender and sexed embodiment is therefore politically problematic, born as it is, according to queer, out of an internalization of heterosexual normativity. But the dissertation also set out to look at transsexual experiences in context. To this end, I examined not just respondents' experiences of gender and transition, and their attitudes

regarding gender and embodiment, but also how these experiences reflected the wider sociological contexts in which they took place and shape. The primary focus of my fieldwork and analysis was phenomenological, and therefore *with* the subjective worlds of my respondents, but not without a recognition of these personal worlds as socially located.

The experiences of the sample were collected using the technique of the life history interview to produce a richly descriptive phenomenological account, as part of the argument of the dissertation was that transsexual subjectivities cannot be evaluated outside of the context of lived experience unfolding in specific cultural, temporal, and geographic locations. Through analysis of the data from the interviews, it emerged that none of my respondents related to the terms transgender and transsexual as abiding identifications, and that all wished to be identified first and foremost as men or women. This was the most striking and consistent finding across the sample. However, perhaps the most politically significant finding was that although respondents wished to be identified within the terms of the heterosexual gender binary, their attitudes and the nature of their transitions – for instance what kinds of interventions they could comfortably live with and how they conceived of the categories of man and woman in terms both of anatomy and behaviour – could not be described either as queer or as heterosexually orthodox. For instance, although all of the respondents wanted bodies that they considered to be and to look, male or female, the norms that guided what physical masculinity and femininity actually looked like were heterogeneous. Some were adamant that they wanted and needed all of the available interventions in order to embody their gender. Others were happy with the effects of hormone therapy. Certainly, if queer gender means a high degree of ambiguity in terms of mainstream gender

norms, then these respondents cannot be described as queer. However, they cannot be described as uncomplicatedly heteronormative either, because even as some respondents embraced putatively binary identities their lives revealed instances in which they powerfully unsettled gender norms too. Thus, their experiences can be described as unsettling of formulaic interpretations within feminism and queer theory about what produces transsexuality and what transsexuals are like in terms of their gender politics.

An evaluation of the politics of these respondents' (and others like them) has to be located in a far broader context than that of their decision to make physical transitions. What was evident from a close examination of respondents' attitudes was that though they identified as men and women, they did not, in general, see these positions and the behaviours conventionally associated with them in a consistently heteronormative way. Even those who wished to walk a more conventional path did not see this path as requisite for everyone else. In other words, respondents did not impose their norms on others. And, although they were guided by a set of conventional norms as to what men and women are, what they look like, and what they do, none were particularly attached to those norms as a reflection of some higher truth about gender to which others ought to be bound, which is ironic in light of the fact that, as I showed in the literature review chapter, some queer theory asserts a higher truth about gender and it requires gender variant people to live their difference according to queer norms if they are not to be shunned or made the object of intense criticism in theory and activist practice.

Although the findings of this research do not represent a complete contestation of queer theorizations of gender variance, they certainly suggest that a theorization of

transsexuality that rests solely on the insights of queer will misinterpret key elements of the experiences of transsexual people as well as of the meanings of their transitions.

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