Chapter 3

Trans Women and "Interpretive Intimacy": Some Initial Reflections

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> Our activity has no rules, though it is certainly intentional activity and we both understand what we are doing. The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an *openness to surprise*. . . . Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are *open to self-construction*. (Lugones, 1987, p. 16)

My aim in this paper is to chart and theorize some of the prevalent challenges that many trans women face in negotiating their sexualities in a world that is not always friendly to them. For example, because trans women are not ordinarily viewed as "one kind of woman among many," a man who has an orientation to women isn't expected to be straightforwardly attracted to (at least some) trans women as well. On the contrary, attraction to a trans woman may lead to worries that he is really gay (or bisexual). To be sure, there are indeed men who are specifically attracted

to trans women *as trans*. But this raises its own worries; in particular, there is a concern among some trans women about being fetishized. Some of these types of attractions may serve to undermine trans women *as women*.

The point is that trans women face some important challenges in negotiating the desires of others, in seeking out intimate relations, and in understanding the nature of their own sexualities. Before attempting to understand the sexuality of trans women, then it would seem to be important (as a first step) to get a better sense of these challenges. In this chapter, I undertake this task both as a trans woman who has experienced these challenges and as a philosopher theorizing them. Specifically, this chapter is an extension of previous theoretical work stemming primarily from my own experience as a trans woman and my knowledge of other trans women I've met through my life travels, as well as grassroots community activism.

This chapter will tend to focus primarily on trans individuals who were assigned male at birth but who now self-identify either as women or as trans women (I will use the expression trans women to refer to them). I will leave it open whether these individuals avail themselves to (or wish to avail themselves to) various medical technologies, including hormone therapy, genital reconstruction surgery, breast augmentation surgery, facial feminization, and so forth. In focusing on trans women, I do not discuss (non-trans) women who are in intimate relations with trans men, nor do I discuss some of the specific issues that trans men may face when viewed as women. A comprehensive account of transgender sexuality and women would need to take both into consideration.

The starting point of my theorizing is that we ought to accept the self-identity claims of all trans people as presumptively valid and true without requesting justification as a condition of acceptance.[1] This is important because one of the things that makes it particularly difficult to understand the sexuality of trans people is the fact that it has seemed necessary to frame trans people *as trans people* within some type of theoretical framework. The reason for this is the starting assumption that trans people are aberrant or at least in need of explanation (usually an etiological one). For example, Gender Identity Disorder is used as diagnostic category in both the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) and the World Health Organization's ICD-10 (International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems), Once trans people are understood as possessing a kind of identity disorder (whereby gender identity is misaligned with physical body), any subsequent discussions of trans sexuality filtered through that framework are going to be shaped accordingly. The more general problem is that this type of project is distracting. It tends to take up so much space that it forces out other types of inquiry; because one is so busy looking to provide a theoretical frame of reference that will render trans people intelligible, the question about trans sexuality either disappears or becomes

part of the theoretical frame itself. For example, some theoretical accounts (e.g., Bailey, 2003) have included sexuality as a crucial part of an etiological account of trans women specifically. In my view, such accounts fail to respect the self-identities of trans people and thereby prevent the possibility of actually learning about their sexuality.

A consequence of my starting point that we ought to accept the self-identity claims of trans people as presumptively valid and true is that one may not always immediately understand what self-identifying terms mean when a trans person uses it. For example, the fact that a trans woman self-identifies as a woman does not entail that she has had genital reconstruction surgery or even that she wants to have that surgery. On the contrary, a trans woman may take her body as a typical example of the body of a *trans* woman, and therefore of a *woman*.

This is a departure from common ways of framing trans people (the "wrong body model" and the "transgender model"). In the wrong body model, transsexuality is construed as a misalignment between gender identity and sexed body where the identity is innate and determines one's *real* sex. It's on the basis of this identity that one affirms that one has always *really* belonged to a particular sex where the morphological body is viewed as "wrong" and in need of surgical alteration.[2] In the transgender model, trans people experience oppression and violence because they challenge the view that there exists two nontraversible mutually exclusive categories in which all individuals belong. Their so-called "beyond the binary" status is seen as the source of conflict and hostility.[3]

Both accounts ironically tend to invalidate the self-identities of at least some trans people, because they do not start with the view that all trans self-identity claims should be presumptively accepted as valid.[4] For example, not all trans people self-identify as beyond the binary. Many see themselves as men and women. Yet, not all of these trans men and women see their bodies as wrong, either. Some trans women are not interested in genital reconstruction surgery, despite the fact that they see themselves as women (or trans women). In the "wrong body" account, such individuals won't count as women since they do not undergo surgical transformation and since they do not *want* to undergo such transformation. That said, these women may not see their bodies as in-between or beyond the binary, if they believe that their bodies are fairly typical for a trans woman and that a trans woman is a kind of woman. Neither account really does justice to such self-identities, then.

Instead of understanding trans people as standing in conflict with a gender binary, I adopt the more general view that (many) trans people tend to oppose the meanings of mainstream gender terms and practices.[5] I understand this conflict in terms of the contrast between dominant or mainstream culture and subcultural formations. In this view, a trans person can count as "a man" according to dominant cultural practices, while

counting as a woman in trans-friendlier subcultural contexts. Consider somebody who lives as a woman, sees herself as a woman, has been sustained in a subculture that respects her gender identity, and then finds that she is subject to violence on the grounds that she is "really male." The invalidation is not merely the invalidation of an individual self-identity, but an entire life that has been lived in relation to others in a different world.[6] This conflict is one that's deeply bound up with the distribution of power and the capacity to enforce a way of life and a way of seeing the world, regardless of the personal costs.

INTERPRETIVE INTIMACY AND SEXUAL DESIRE

Sexual/affectional orientation is generally taken to involve attraction to people of particular genders (i.e., *gynephilic* meaning woman loving and *androphilic* meaning man loving). Trans people may be thought to challenge the simplicity of this conception because they point to ways in which the features that typically align for men and women come apart. There are two different ways in which this happens. First, some trans people have bodies that may be read as mixed. For example, some trans women take feminizing hormones (growing breasts) but do not have vaginoplasty. Such a woman would have a mixture of bodily properties—a female-appearing body with a penis. If we take sexual attraction as targeting sexed bodies, then these mixed bodies are going to yield complications in understanding gyne- and androphilic desires in a straightforward way. Second, even in cases in which a trans person does not have a body that may be read as mixed, they may have a gender presentation that is taken as incongruent with their sexed body. Again, we have the possibility that the gender presentation and expression might matter more in the attraction or it might be that the sexed body matters more (or both matter in different ways).

In trying to re-understand sexual attraction within the context of trans people, however, it is important to keep in mind the centrality of respecting the self-identities of trans people and how they make sense of their own bodies. This already requires that we reassess the view that there is mixture or incongruence at all, in the above cases. The question we need to consider is actually quite different than what this "fragmentation" suggests. It is this: How can we make sense of sexual desire in light of the alternative interpretations that trans people use to undergird their self-identities? How can we do so in a way that respects trans self-identities?

To begin, it is important to understand that some trans people feel uncomfortable with sex-differentiated parts of their bodies when those parts are thought not to agree with their gendered sense of self. For example, a trans woman might feel uncomfortable with her penis and finds this to be invalidating of her womanhood. The interesting fact is that those body parts most likely to be a source of discomfort to trans people (genitals, breasts) are also those that are put into social play in only very few situations—sexual situations being among the most common and important. This can obviously lead to challenges when negotiating sexual activity (particularly when sexual scripts centralize those body parts). Ironically, it is precisely such situations that provide trans people with the opportunity to reinterpret their bodies and to do so in an intersubjective way (at the very least, since they are the very few occasions in which these parts are involved). What gives sexual interaction such a powerful capacity for reinterpretation is, in part, the fact that in a sexual context, fantasy and role-play are permitted to an extent that is not normally acceptable in mundane public interactions. That is, within a sexual context, there is an element of *playfulness* that opens the doors of possibility, paying less attention to the constraints of social reality.

C. Jacob Hale (1997) discusses different types of strategies (retooling or recoding the body) that trans people might employ. One example involves the use of inanimate objects (such as dildos) in a way that allows them to "take on some of the phenomenological characteristics of erogenous body parts" (Hale, 1997, p. 230). Another involves renaming the body part itself. For example, what might be called a vagina can be called (in a leatherdyke context) a "boyhole" or a "fuckhole." Similarly, what might be called a penis in mainstream discourse can be called a "clit" instead. The point of these practices, according to Hale, is to "disrupt the dominant cultural meanings of . . . genitals [or other body parts] and to reconfigure those meanings" (Hale, 1997, p. 230).

There are many different kinds of such practices and it will be worth mentioning a few more. First, during intimate physical contact, there might be a "transfer" of body parts between partners. For example, if a trans woman (with a penis) is having penetrative intercourse with a non-trans woman, it is possible for the partners to erotically reunderstand the penis as belonging to the latter and the vagina to the former and the penetration as running in the opposite direction. Second (and this is perhaps a limiting case), it is possible to simply exclude the body part from any sexual role in the encounter and to effectively pretend it isn't there. While this may seem not to be a case of recoding, I think there is a sense in which it might count. Certainly, in order to perform this exclusion, it is likely that standard sexual scripts about what counts as typical sexual activity and how it is supposed to be performed may need to be rewritten. Third (and this one has consequences outside of the sexual situation), one might understand one's gender identity (as a woman, say) to accord perfectly with one's body (including a penis). That is, by recognizing trans women as women, one could understand one's penis as entirely congruent with one's womanhood. This would involve a reconfiguration of genitals (as they are related to the concept of a woman) and also the very concept of woman itself. This last move opens up notable possibilities. For example,

it could make sense for a trans woman to engage in active penetrative intercourse with her penis without this activity invalidating her *trans* womanhood. The social meaning of the activity and its relation to womanhood will have been reinterpreted.

Then, as I understand it, trans bodily dysphoria is an interpretative affair that pertains to social meanings attributed to body parts, rather than body parts taken as entirely independent of social meaning. While this might suggest that trans people would be better off trying to alter the meaning of their bodies rather than changing their bodies outright, it is also important (as Hale notes) to recognize that there are individual limits for trans people on how much reinterpretation is psychologically possible. In some cases, there may be no choice but to either forgo sex altogether, have sex in such a way that excludes the body part as much as possible from the situation, or have sex that is to some degree unpleasant. In other cases, sexual reinterpretation may indeed be possible—and largely facilitated within a sexual arena.

Recognizing that trans bodily dysphoria concerns the social meaning of body parts brings out the possibility that a trans person may experience bodily dysphoria under one interpretation of their body and may also be free from such dysphoria under a different interpretation (rather than by having one body part as opposed to another). Which interpretation is operative, then, is going to make all the difference in the world in terms of a trans person's comfort and ability to express herself intimately. Indeed, the issue does not merely concern comfort but emotional safety—certain interpretations can undermine her self-identity altogether.

Which interpretation is operative in the situation is going to depend on multiple factors, including the interpretation being used by the partner and also the interpretation being used by the trans person herself. It may be that each person has a different interpretation. Perhaps the partner has an invalidating interpretation, while the trans woman has a validating one. Given that invalidating interpretations tend to be supported by mainstream conception of trans people, it is likely that type of interpretation will possess more social force and hold sway. That said, it is not always obvious what interpretation is operative for a partner—this is not something that always comes out immediately. The discrepancy might be discovered later or never at all. At any rate, an element of trust (or distrust) can be part of the experience. Indeed, it is fair to say that there is a unique kind of vulnerability for trans people which may involve being intimate or exposed in ways that open oneself up for invalidating interpretations. This vulnerability takes place amidst questions, such as: "How does this person understand this region of my body? What does it mean to them? What do they want with it? Who am I to them?"

This is also suggestive of a particular kind of intimacy, namely a trans vulnerability that has been heard or interpreted in a way that is validating.

In other words, an invalidating discrepancy in bodily interpretation can be seen as a failure of intimacy and a lack of discrepancy can be seen as an achievement of intimacy. I say "achievement" because the negotiation of a shared interpretation goes against the grain of mainstream social meaning attributed to the body. This achievement of intimacy could involve the conscious participation in sexual activities that recode. And it need not always be initiated by the trans person herself. That is, in cases of a trusting relationship, it may be possible for a partner of a trans person to help her recode her body in a way that she might not have thought possible. In other cases, there might be a less clear vision of a positive bodily interpretation and sexual activity might be more exploratory—provisionally searching for healthier ways of understanding. The point is that there is a way of understanding these particular cases of intimacy around the interpretation of trans bodies as intimacies of meaning.

In this context, the nature of the partner's sexual attraction can play a role in literally helping recode a trans person's body. Consider a case in which a partner is attracted to a trans woman in a way that does not include *all* of the trans woman's body (because it is seen as incompatible wither her status as a woman). Attractions of this type are informed by mainstream gender interpretations of the body, and as such they may be invalidating. But consider a case in which a partner is attracted to a trans woman as a woman, but who also finds that that she or he is attracted to everything about her (or at least is sexually interested in engaging with all of her parts). Here, the desire can be sensitive to the trans woman's own self-interpretation. It starts with an initial attraction, but it is open and flexible. This kind of desire has the capacity to play a role (perhaps a fundamental role) in recoding a body according to an interpretation and helping undo trans bodily dysphoria. In light of this, we can distinguish two different types of gynephilic attractions—those which can play a role in achieving interpretive intimacy and those that cannot.

For the rest of the paper, I want to understand some of the specific social challenges that trans women face in achieving a validating interpretive intimacy. In particular, I want to look at some of the social forces that work to shut down the possibility of interpretive intimacy. This will include objectifying sexual desire (i.e., desire that is structured by transphobic interpretations and which foreclose interpretive intimacy). And, my hope is that this will help illuminate what needs to be done in order to make such intimacy less elusive.

REALITY ENFORCEMENT AND THE FORECLOSURE OF INTERPRETIVE INTIMACY

One of the most important features of mainstream gender practice, in my view, is the fact that public gender presentation is expected to align

with privately concealed genital status. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, public gender presentation can be seen to euphemistically communicate or symbolically represent genital status (Bettcher, 2006). This means that everybody is literally communicating their private genital status on a regular basis in public. To see that this is an abusive practice, consider the following: It is typically inappropriate to ask somebody explicitly about their genitals (imagine asking your coworker, "Do you have a penis or a vagina?"). To do so would be a boundary transgression (and a form of sexual harassment). The reason for this is that genitals (and information about genitals) are generally deemed personal (i.e., private). This means that even the euphemistic or coded transference of such information can be boundary violating (since the information is *still* private). Yet, in my view, gender presentation systematically communicates genital status and refusal to engage in this practice can lead to extreme violence (as we shall see below). So, we have a system that mandates boundary violation under threat of violence. That's an abusive system (Bettcher, 2009).

In my view, trans people can be understood to opt out of this system. By this, I mean two things. First, trans people present themselves in such a way that they can be taken to "misalign" gender presentation with their sexed body.[7] So, in a way, they refuse to disclose genital status through gender presentation, and hence flout the communicative mandate to declare genital status. Second, trans people understand what they are doing in a way that diverges somewhat from mainstream conceptions. Typically, a trans woman will see herself as a *woman* rather than really a man. Doing this requires not only understanding gender categories in ways that may depart from mainstream conceptions (which link gender category to genital status), but it may also require reunderstanding the very practice of gender presentation itself. For example, in some trans subcultural contexts, gender presentation is simply *not* taken to communicate genital status. Rather, it is generally taken to indicate and express a person's self-identity (as a woman, as a man, etc.), and more or less how the person wants to be interacted with. Beyond this, it may involve reunderstanding sexed bodies as well. As we have seen, body parts that are taken as male in mainstream contexts may be coded in different ways in trans-specific contexts. And, gender boundaries on intimacy may be altered (bodies understood as subject to gendered female and male boundaries in a mainstream context are subject to differential boundaries on intimacy. For example, there is a boundary on female toplessness but not male toplessness). My claim is that these can be altered by trans people (at least in certain contexts).

Because trans people opt out of this system, they can be subjected to what I call "reality enforcement." Reality enforcement is the mechanism by which acquiescence to the mandate to communicate genital status is enforced. This involves, first, the invalidation of trans self-identity

through the imposition of a gender category from without (e.g., "That's a man"). Second, because of the representational function of gender presentation, the "misaligned" presentation of trans people is taken as a kind of mere appearance (e.g., "*Really* a man merely *disguised* as a woman"). In cases where the trans person is "discovered" to be trans, she may be represented as having engaged in deception (i.e., as having misrepresented her genital status through her gender presentation).[8] In cases where she is already disclosed as trans, she may be presented as engaging in a kind of pretense. Either way, the trans person is delegitimized through an appearance/reality contrast (and hence subjected to a double bind) and held morally accountable for her actions. Finally, because of the central role of private genital status in fixing terms like woman and female, trans people are subjected to sexual violence through tactics of overt genital verification (to determine what they are "really"). In less extreme cases, they may be subject to inappropriate questions, such as "Have you had the surgery?" or "Are you a woman or a man?" or statements about "anatomical sex," which euphemistically discuss private information about genital status. The reason for this is obvious—it involves the effort to reenforce the cultural mandate to symbolically declare genital status that trans people have effectively opted out of. This last feature is particularly important, in that it points to a very distinctive form of sexual violence and/or boundary violation specific to trans people that is essentially bound up with identity invalidation itself (i.e., determining the reality of a person's sex through genital verification). This obviously is not inconsequential when considering trans people entering potentially intimate (and exposing) sexual situations, and then confronting invalidating interpretations of this type.[9]

Importantly, for our purposes, reality enforcement can concern sexual identity as well as gender identity. For sexual identity categories are, like gender categories, descriptors taken up by individuals and deployed within narrative self-conceptions to help confer intelligibly on their lives and on who they are (sometimes by staking a political stance or a community affiliation). While sexual identity labels categorize sexual/affectional desires and practices, they need not always correspond exactly with an individual's actual desires and practices (sometimes apparently contradictory practices are even left out of the self-conception). More importantly, these categories can serve a role in offering positive narrative interpretations that run against mainstream invalidation.

This is particularly important in light of the close connection between gender and sexual identity categories. Besides indicating the sex of the object of attraction, sexual identity categories tend to indicate the sex of the subject possessing that attraction. This is because sexual orientation is framed in terms of a distinction between same-sex and opposite-sex attractions (i.e., in terms of whether the subject and object are the same sex or opposite sexes). For example, "lesbian" indicates both a gynephilic orientation and the sex

of the person possessing that orientation (woman), as well as the fact that subject and object belong to the same sex. The consequence of this overlap between gender and sexual identity categories with regard to their role in narrative self-conception is that reality enforcement often concerns both.

For example, while a trans woman may self-identify as a heterosexual woman, she may be viewed as a gay man. That is, her sexual identity can also be invalidated insofar as she is taken to have a same-sex orientation. Again, this means that there will be a contest of interpretations. Her sex life (her desires, activities, etc.) will be viewed as "gay" by the enforcer, while she may see her sex life according to a very different interpretation. The consequence of this is that her recoding activities are not recognized for what they are. Instead, all her activities are interpreted in an invalidating way. In such a case, not only is there no interpretive intimacy, but also the very possibility of it is foreclosed.

Second, the appearance/reality contrast now applies to orientation as well. She is seen not just as really a man disguised as a woman, but really a *gay* man, disguised as a *straight* woman.[10] Thus *straight* orientation (of a woman) is now the misleading appearance and *gay* orientation (of a man) is the hidden reality where homosexual desire is read off from the revealed "body" (i.e., the penis). But once orientation is added to the equation, a *motive* for "pretending" to be a woman is immediately forthcoming (namely, to seduce unsuspecting straight men into having sex with them, i.e., sexual predation), and this has the consequence of erasing the importance of her own gender identity as the actual motive for her gender presentation. As a consequence, interpretive intimacy is foreclosed in another way: because there is no room for her own gender identity, there is no way to so much as access her ways of self-understanding.

Finally, in this case, the trans person herself is subject to a form of sexual violence (or at least harassment) involved in genitally determining that this person is "really a man." Far from interpretive intimacy, we have a very trans specific form of sexual boundary violation. Ironically, this can be obscured when the trans women herself is viewed as a sexual predator (a gay may try to seduce straight men by passing himself off as a woman).

Likewise, a trans woman who sees herself as lesbian may have her sexual self-identity invalidated by being represented as a straight man trying to pass himself off as a woman. Again, there will be a contest of interpretation over the nature of her desire and the meaning of her sexual activities (thereby erasing the possibility of sexual recoding and foreclosing the possibility of interpretative intimacy). This time, her apparent orientation (lesbian) will be taken to hide her true orientation (heterosexual). And, if there is any motive imputed in this case, it will be one in which she is read as a man who is trying to gain access to women's private space (restrooms, etc.), in order to commit acts of sexual violence or, minimally, to violate women's privacy boundaries for some type of sexual gratification (once again, removing the capacity of her own gender identity to confer an intelligibility on her desire and activities). Finally, the attribution of the intent to violate boundaries is precisely the cover that hides the trans-specific boundary violation to which she is subject—a violation that occurs in place of interpretive intimacy. The point is that, because reality enforcement also concerns sexual identity, there is a way in which interpretive intimacy is made extraordinarily challenging and elusive.

THE SEXUALIZATION OF TRANS WOMEN

Reality enforcement goes to the heart of passing (and being read) as a daily issue of concern for many trans people. In my view, gender presentation is taken to communicate genital status, so "to pass as a (non-trans) woman" is to successfully communicate that one is "anatomically female." This issue of passing (and its connection to reality enforcement) is particularly pronounced in the cases in which trans people (particularly trans women) are dating or getting to know somebody in such a way that might lead to sexual intimacy. If the other person doesn't know, at what point (if any) does the trans person disclose? And, of course, the issue of interpretation in disclosure is crucial. After all, there is a difference between disclosing that one is a trans woman (on the one hand) and "really a man" (on the other). That said, when a trans woman says that she is a trans woman, this can be understood to mean "I am really a man," precisely because her very words are understood in a different way. There's a double bind here where trans people who are "out" about who they are may find that the potential partners they are interested in are not interested in them because they are seen as really women or really men.

It is precisely in sexualized or potentially sexualized cases that, however, one sees the most extreme manifestations of the reality enforcement. For example, Schilt and Westbrook (2009) found in a study of newspaper reports about homicides of people "described as doing gender so as to possibly be seen as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth" that in 56 percent of cases, the reporters "depict violence as resulting from private, sexual interactions in which the perpetrator feels 'tricked' into homosexuality by 'gender deceivers'" (p. 452). Similarly, Schilt and Westbrook (2009) find in their study of trans men in the workplace that while women can, in most cases, accept trans men as men, "in sexualized situations, women frame trans men as deceptive—tricking women into seemingly heterosexual relationships without the necessary biological marker of manhood" (p. 450). The point is that many trans people (particularly trans women seeking men) face difficulties (often *great risk*) in negotiating sexuality, and in developing and maintaining intimate relationships that most non-trans people do not. Indeed, disclosing one's trans status may often lead to violence just as easily as discovery.

In light of this, we can begin to understand ways in which trans women are sexualized in nonintimate ways. Consider that women can be subject to unwanted sexual advances and are sometimes double binded in their options for addressing such situations. For example, some female gender presentations can be construed as reflections of sexual character ("promiscuous") or at least of sexual interest (regardless of the woman's own actual character and feelings). More generally, there is this phenomenon of coded or euphemistic nonverbal communication in heterosexual dating ritual that leaves women vulnerable to tactics of sexual manipulation, as well as blaming the victim in case of rape. For example, the very gesture of (a man) buying a drink (for a woman) and the responsive gesture of receiving it has obvious, albeit vague, communicative import. Even a man's sheer approach and initiation of a seemingly innocuous and frivolous conversation can have coded meaning.

Such behavior is often regulated by gender norms that leave women subject to risk no matter what they do. For example, terminating the coded interaction too abruptly may indicate that she is unfriendly or "bitchy." Besides this, consider that the aesthetic norms according to which many women are held accountable are precisely sexualized norms (i.e., to be considered an attractive women involves sexualizing oneself as a woman)—that is, to present oneself in a way that can be misconstrued as communicating sexual interest. In this way, women can be subject to difficult double binds: either violate gendered norms of conduct or else find oneself implicated in a nonverbal communicative exchange that has as its aim unwanted sexual interaction.

There is an interesting analogy here between the way female gender presentation is taken to communicate sexual interest or character (regardless of the woman's actual intention) and the way gender presentation in general is taken to communicate genital status (regardless of the intentions of trans people). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, both phenomena are aspects of the same system (Bettcher, 2007). One way to understand this is to see social negotiations of sexual intimacy (or distance) as generally euphemistic in nature and as essentially gendered within a heterosexual framework. The reason that it becomes important to know a person's genital status is to know how, exactly, to negotiate the closeness/distance with a given person, to know with whom to aim for sexual relations, and, from an institutional point of view, to regulate intimacy through sex-segregation (in restroom, changing-rooms, congregate housing, etc.).

In light of this, it is unsurprising that trans women who pass as "woman" (i.e., who pass as anatomically female) are vulnerable to the binds described above in ways that are more complicated in placing her at risk of being exposed as "really a man pretending to be a woman." When she finds herself in a sexualized context (or one that is leading there), it is highly likely that if exposed, the trans woman will be viewed as "really a man, trying to seduce unsuspecting straight men." This risk of exposure and violence creates a pressure to maintain a certain form of presentation and conduct that maintains the nonverbal exchange. That is, trying to terminate the sexual interaction may actually lead to exposure. However, as the nonverbal communicative exchange continues, it is likely that she will also become more and more an object of sexual interest, and therefore scrutiny (increasing the chances of being read as really a man). Moreover, the longer the exchange continues, the greater the risk for extreme violence, since the man's own sexual desire is increasingly implicated as the path to intimacy is further traversed (Bettcher, 2006).

The problem is that the gendered communicative negotiation of a gradual path to sexual intimacy is constructed in such a way that is generally vague, nonexplicit, and nonverbalized. And, it is preset in such a way that the path is highly dangerous for trans women. Consequently, there is no room for the verbal explicitness that is sometimes needed in the aim for an interpretive intimacy. On the contrary, the pathway leads inevitably to a "shocking discovery" that, far from facilitating such intimacy, is the exemplar of trans-specific boundary violation. One way to put the point is to say that trans women do not have access to the standard, heterosexual communicative resources (as problematic as they are) for negotiating interpersonal closeness in the direction of sexual intimacy.

The situation is even more complex, however, since trans women who are "out" as trans may still find themselves subject to sexualization in very distinctive ways. This, too, however, is a function of the appearance/reality contrast. Consider cases in which a man is attracted to a trans woman *because she is trans.* Typically, this can play out as the outright eroticization of reality enforcement itself. For example, some men are attracted to feminine men or feminized men who are functionally women. In such a case, he may see through a trans woman's gender appearance to "the deeper reality" and this interplay (male filtered through female) may itself constitute the object of desire. Or consider sexual attraction to a "she-male" or a "chick with a dick." In this case, the eroticism may well involve the desire on the part of the man to provide oral sex for or to receive anal sex from this fantastic being. In such a case, however, the object of attraction is an impossible object whose existence is made manifest only in sexual fantasy. (I am imagining an analogy to a centaur or Pegasus). I say that this "creature" is "fantastic and impossible" since, according to the rules of reality enforcement, she would be viewed as "really a man with breasts, pretending to be a woman." In the fantasy, however, she is seen either as a woman (who has a penis) or else as something in between man and woman. This exception to reality enforcement is permitted because sexual fantasy (and the enactment thereof) allows for a kind of socially acceptable context of

play or pretense in which the typical strictures of reality can be set aside. In this type of eroticism, a trans woman becomes something that cannot exist in reality and that has no substance as a person.

Besides such cases of trans-specific desire, the salience of sexualized female gender presentation and its central place in heterosexual gynephilic attraction makes it unsurprising that *almost any* non-trans men (who are identified as straight) can find themselves attracted to trans women, regardless of the fact that they view them as "really men." This can cause an obvious cognitive dissonance: "I see myself as straight, and yet I have sexual attraction to somebody who is 'really a man.' Am I gay?" There is an irony here, however, in that if the attraction to the trans woman is an attraction to her insofar as she *looks like a woman,* it is hard to see that the attraction itself is androphilic (or gay). Moreover, there is a way in which a trans woman's penis can be entirely irrelevant to a sexual encounter (in case she provides oral sex or receives anal sex). Indeed, if the trans woman herself feels uncomfortable with her penis and wishes to engage in the retooling tactic of "exclusion," there can be agreement on both sides about this.[11] Rather than playing a role in sexual attraction, the "it's a man" part of the dissonance functions within the context of a social concern about loss of status through being viewed by peers as really gay.

Unsurprisingly it is not an uncommon experience among trans women to find men who are willing to maintain sexual relations with them while relegating them to the status of "dirty secret." Such relegation places a trans woman in a social context that is walled off from the rest of her partner's life. In such cases, we will have a clear failure of interpretive sexual intimacy. This is obviously the case in which the eroticism is literally structured by the appearance/reality contrast. However, this is also true when it is not. Suppose, for example, the trans woman is uncomfortable with her penis and uses the tactic of exclusion. This works well for her partner, since the visible presence of her penis would threaten his self-identity. There is, nonetheless, a fundamental interpretational disagreement between her and her partner about the basis for that exclusion: While she wants to work around it because it makes her feel uncomfortable (and she experiences it as invalidating), the partner actually wants to avoid it because it reminds him that the person he is with is "really a man only pretending to be a woman." This is an example of a failure in interpretive intimacy.

In all these cases, there is obviously something that can be called trans-specific objectification. It involves sexual desire that is either structured or enabled by the appearance/reality contrast coupled with a complete foreclosure of interpretive intimacy; instead, there is a trans-specific boundary violation. This type of objectification is, in my view, closely bound up with the stereotypic representation of trans women as perpetually sexually interested and available "whores." Such a representation can be seen

to arise, in part, as a consequence of the juxtaposition between desire for a culturally constructed (hetero) sexualized "sex-inviting" feminine appearance/gender presentation on the one hand and invalidation as really a gay man trying to seduce straight men on the other. In other words, while attraction to a trans woman is effectively gynephilic, the invalidating "it's really a gay man" is used as a way to erase a trans woman's subjectivity (and gender identity) by reducing her motivations to deceptive and predatory homosexual desire. This sexualization is only confirmed and augmented by the way the gender presentation itself is sexualized and construed as sex-inviting. In this way, she becomes nothing but a highly sexualized being (a predatory gay may be disguised by a sexualized, provocative gender presentation). However, once we have the involvement of objectification desire and the consequent relegation of trans woman to "dirty secret," trans women are literally forced to inhabit the stereotype. In this way, the representation serves as a cover for the actual objectification that is occurring.

SEXUAL IDENTITY AND INTERPRETIVE INTIMACY

In this last section, I want to discuss what I consider as one of the main obstacles to interpretive intimacy—namely, the self-identity of the potential partner and their own vulnerability to reality enforcement. For the interesting fact is that, in cases of potential sexual intimacy, reality enforcement expands in its invalidating capacity by applying to the sexual identity of the partner (or potential partner) and the relationship itself.

Consider a trans woman who is in a relationship with a non-trans lesbian identified woman. Both may see their desires as gynephilic and both may see the nature of their sexual/affection activities as lesbian and the relationship itself as lesbian. However, if the trans woman is not viewed as a woman at all, then the non-trans woman may find her own lesbian identity called into question. It might be worrying that she has some androphilic desire and that she is engaging in nonlesbian activities and that her sexual identity ought to be reassessed ("Is she bisexual now?"). The point is that, just as trans people may struggle with identity invalidation, so people who enter into authentic, loving relationships with trans people can find that their own (sexual) identities are invalidated. Indeed, the relationship itself can be invalidated by being construed as a heterosexual relationship. What is lost in this invalidation is not merely the fact that it is seen by its participants as lesbians, but also all the rich trans-specific meaning-making that characterizes the nature of the intimacy in a very fundamental way.

Recognizing this can help us understand how the self-identity of a potential partner can undermine the possibility of interpretative intimacy. In order to see this, it is important to pull apart homophobia and

reality enforcement. To be sure, reality enforcement is often intersected with extreme homophobia and heterosexism: The (non-trans) man reacts in the way that he does because he does not want to be seen as having gay attractions or engaging in same-sex sexuality. But it would be a mistake to reduce such cases to homophobia. These instances of homophobia are predicated on the prior view that trans women are "really men." And reality enforcement can operate independently of this homophobia. For example, some lesbians trans women find that some non-trans lesbian women are unwilling to be sexually or emotionally intimate with them precisely because the latter view the former as "really straight men." And, non-trans gay men may not be interested in gay trans men because they view them as "really women." While reality enforcement lies at the root of this disinterest, there is no analogous homophobia involved.

Whether homophobia is involved or not, however, there is concern to preserve sexual self-identity against possible invalidation. For example, because some men sees a trans woman as really a man, he may see her androphilic attraction to him as homosexual in nature and the potential sex activities open to the two as homosexual. Should the potential partner experience sexual attraction to this trans woman, while it might be seen as heterosexual desire by her, it may be seen as homosexual desire by him, thereby as invalidating of his own self-identity as a heterosexual man. Similarly, a non-trans lesbian woman, who sees a trans woman as really a man, may interpret the desire of a trans woman for her, and the potential sexual activities between them, as heterosexual. Should she herself experience sexual desire for the trans woman, it will then be read by her as androphilic in nature (thereby possibly as invalidating her own self-identity as a lesbian). In both cases, the sexual rejection of the trans women will be necessary, in part, to help preserve sexual self-identity against potential invalidation ("spill over," if you will, from reality enforcement itself). Of course, if the self-identity of a heterosexual man is supported by homophobic masculine ideals, then the potential invalidation of his own self-identity may cause shame and internalized loathing, in turn leading to externalized masculine violence against the object of his desire. But the basis for this is something prior to that.

What is striking about this potential "spill over" of reality enforcement is precisely that it is contingent on foreclosing the possibility of interpretive intimacy in the first place. For should a man who is worried about what his desires show him about his own sexual identity allow himself to engage in interpretive intimacy, it would be possible for him to recode his own sexual desire as well. That is, once he sees his partner as a woman (in a way that is informed by her own narrative self-understanding), he will be able to maintain his own self-identity as a heterosexual man. The requirement is an alternative understanding of what that means acquired

precisely through the negotiations of interpretive intimacy. In such a context, it is even possible that there is a corresponding change in the nature of his desire (from one structured by the appearance/reality contrast to something that is more interpretively open). The irony, then, is that a man with such a self-identity may resist intimacy with the trans woman he desires, when it is precisely a genuine intimacy that could transform him and allow him to engage in the interpretive intimacy necessary to genuinely see her as she sees herself.

Unfortunately, the pervasiveness of reality enforcement as a phenomenon can engender the desire of trans men and women to prove themselves real and to seek validation for this reality in the face of such reality enforcement, and sometimes this "push back" against invalidation can actually be quite harmful to trans people themselves (and to others as well). What this means is that trans women may settle for a situation that is invalidating to her and that lacks interpretive intimacy because it at least seems to hold the promise of validation. Indeed, she might stay in a relationship that is physically abusive or sexually objectifying in order to prove her "reality" as a woman. But it is also clear that some type of sexual intimacy may be necessary to help trans women negotiate their bodies in a way that is congruent with their self-identity. To the extent that even invalidating relationships can help achieve that (at least by offering sexual "pretense"), it may serve a necessary function. Such "validation" is costly, however, in that it actually plays into the very invalidation that she is resisting while also sacrificing the possibility of more open, meaning-making possibilities. It's the latter that is necessary in creating a world in which trans women can truly flourish.

NOTES

1. For a defense of this idea, see Bettcher (forthcoming, b).
2. For some examples of this type of view, see Rubin (2003, p. 150–151).
3. For classic formulations, see Stone (1991), Bornstein (1994), Feinberg (1998). I have presented the view in an overly simplified and homogeneous way.
4. For a defense of this, see Bettcher (forthcoming b).
5. For a defense of this, see Bettcher (forthcoming a).
6. The notion of "world" originates in the work of Lugones (1987).
7. I take this to be true even in cases when a trans person has undergone genital reconstruction surgery. For in cases of extreme transphobia, the neo-genitalia will be viewed as artificial and illegitimate and the trans person will be viewed in terms of birth genitalia.
8. For further discussion of trans women viewed as deceivers, see also Serano (2007).
9. For a more detailed account of the phenomenon of reality enforcement, see Bettcher (2007, 2009).
10. See Serano (2007, 2009).

11. The irony is even more pronounced in the case of attraction to trans women who have had vaginoplasty. In such a case, the man might still worry about his orientation because he is being sexually intimate with somebody who is still really a man or with somebody who once was a man.

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