

The discursive construction of sex: Remaking and reclaiming the gendered body in talk about genitals among trans men

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that sex and gender are different is one of the foundational contributions of feminist scholarship. It was this distinction – between the social and the biological – that has allowed scholars who place gender at the center of their work to clearly demonstrate that masculinity and femininity are historically- and culturally-bound constructs rather than natural and universal truths. No matter how self-evident the physiological distinctions between men and women may seem, feminist thinkers have been able to demonstrate that different kinds of social behaviors are expected of the sexes across time and space. Indeed, without a division between the sexual properties of the body (spoken of as *sex*) and the social norms that are expected of individuals who display these characteristics (termed *gender*), it is hard to imagine an alternative trajectory of academic history that could have brought a volume like *Queer Excursions* into existence. At the same time, however, post-structuralist feminists – most famously Judith Butler (1993; also Delphy 1993, Nicholson 1994) – have argued for at least two decades that sex is no more natural than gender, and that both are in fact constructed through the lens of a particular place and time. Sex disguises itself as the inevitable truth of nature, which protects it from the social constructivism that characterizes gender. As long as sex and gender are opposites, biological essentialism retains its ability to enforce an oppressive gender binary. It is through the recognition that sex is not opposed to gender, but rather a part of it, that we can begin to question the foundations of the gender binary itself.

Although the perspective that sex is no more natural than gender has received a good amount of attention from post-structuralist theorists, in many ways it has yet to be integrated into mainstream academic understandings of gender and sex, and the so-called ‘coat rack model’ continues to thrive. The coat rack model provides an easy metaphor for understanding gender and sex as different concepts that stand in opposition to one another: like the body, the rack is framed as a more-or-less immutable object that does not change in shape or appearance. The only thing that varies, in this model, is the coat that is laid on top of the rack, which stands in for any given culture’s particular expectations for women and men (this image was extended by Delphy 1993 as a distinction between a container and a substance contained within). As useful as this image of the coat rack may be, it is also deeply problematic in a number of ways. Most significant, for the purposes of this chapter, is the way that feminist scholars’ and activists’ emphasis on the differences between gender and sex has often resulted in a strict – and ultimately misguided – binary between the supposedly natural state of being male or female on the one hand and the arbitrary cultural burdens placed on members of these categories on the other. The result is the naturalization of biological and categorical

difference between ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies, even as affective, behavioral, and interpersonal aspects of gender are denaturalized.

Butler, who is most often credited with exposing the way sex has been “gender all along,” argues not only that sex is socially constructed, but that it is **discursively** constructed. In this chapter I take to heart the proposal that it is within discourse¹ that we can discover how the body is inscribed with social meaning, rather than locating this meaning in the body itself. Specifically, I focus on the power of language to redefine the body in the face of compulsory gender and sexual normativity. I accomplish this through an analysis of the linguistic practices used during talk about physiological sex characteristics in an online community for female-to-male transsexuals, transgender individuals, and others with shared concerns. For our purposes, female-to-male trans people, or *trans men*, are individuals who are assigned to a female gender role at birth and raised accordingly, but who at some point come to self-identify as male. The lexical items these speakers employ for talking about their genitals – especially when talking about purportedly ‘female’ body parts – demonstrate concretely not only that the dominant division of bodies into categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’ is a cultural phenomenon, but also that we possess the tools to refashion this binary in ways that better suit our visions of a better future for gender, whatever those visions may be.

CRITIQUING THE SEX/GENDER BINARY

The separation of gender from sex is a rather recent intellectual development, and one that is clearly related to the goals of activists and authors associated with the ‘second wave’ of feminist thought. However, as Catherine Delphy’s (1993) history of gender and sex describes, the concept also carries with it a decidedly academic history that includes authors such as Margaret Mead (1935), Ann Oakley (1972), and John Money (1957, with Hampson & Hampson). Prior to the ascendance of the sex/gender binary, a similar division had an established place in the social sciences, particularly sociology, in the form a distinction proposed by Mead between *sex*, or the state of being male or female, and *sex roles*, which are expectations derived from culturally arbitrary connections between gender and certain temperamental characteristics (e.g. the expectation that women will be sympathetic while men will be stoic). As Janet Bing and Victoria Bergvall (1998) have pointed out, the term *gender* was borrowed from linguistics, where it had previously served mainly as a way of talking about grammatical categories that are, in many Indo-European languages, linked to – and yet clearly distinct from – sex (cf. Cameron 1985). *Gender* already contained much of the desired semantic content, then, for a term that was meant to create a contrast with biological sex, despite the close relationship of the two ideas.

Although feminists are often considered the first to have drawn this division between sex and gender (e.g. Delphy 1993 suggests that Oakley 1972 was among the earliest academic to use *gender* in reference to the concept previously known as *sex roles*), it was the work of Money and his co-authors John and Jean Hampson (1955a,

¹ Admittedly, I take a more narrow and literal interpretation of the word *discourse* than is ordinarily found among post-structuralist theorists. When I speak of the “discursive construction of sex,” I am speaking not of the broad social processes through which power structures are negotiated, linguistically and otherwise, but of the patterns that appear in the everyday speech of individuals and their communities.

1955b, 1956, 157) nearly two decades earlier that appears to be the first to propose a systematic distinction between sex and gender both conceptually and terminologically. These researchers were interested in intersex conditions that result in sexual anatomy and/or chromosomal make-up that defy easy categorization as female or male. A major part of Money and the Hampsons' goal (for which Money later became famous) was to make an argument concerning how intersex children ought to be raised. Rather brazenly – at least at the time – they argued that it was not nature but nurture that produced gender identity and its associated behaviors, and that children – intersex or not – could come to be men or women, regardless of biological factors, so long as they were raised as such from early life. Congruent anatomy helped, particularly when it came to convincing parents that their children were 'truly' (fe)male and must be raised as such, but it was not strictly necessary as long as socialization could do its work. In this sense, the research produced by these sexologists in the 1950s was a precursor to more overtly political constructivist views of gender and sexuality. Money and his co-authors clearly recognized that intersex bodies problematize the most simplistic binary models of gender in which everyone is obviously either male or female and therefore obviously either a man or a woman; with this kind of one-dimensional perspective on gender and its relationship to sex, there is no need to separate being female or male from being a woman or man. But these researchers did not go so far as to challenge the moral or political value of a strict gender binary, even as they demonstrated a practical need to be able to pinpoint and speak specifically about the social *gender roles* (the term used by Money and the Hampsons) that members of a society can learn to enact whether they are biologically male, female, or intersex.

The birth of the sex/gender binary, then, is closely linked to gender trouble. Intersex individuals may threaten to disrupt a clean divide between male and female, but we can preserve normative gender roles by making it clear that society need not follow directly from biology; even those who straddle the divide of biological sex categories can be made into normative men and women. Furthermore, the medical and scientific drive to determine the 'true' sex of intersex infants as either female or male (Kessler 1998, Fausto-Sterling 2000) allows intersex conditions to be framed as obstructions of an underlying universal binary. We can begin to see, then, that there is nothing inherently subversive or liberatory about the distinction between gender and sex. Indeed, it can lead to nothing more than a reshaping of biological essentialism into a social one. As Delphy (1993) points out, even in the coat-rack model sex is seen as the starting point for – and source of – gender: "sex comes first, chronologically and hence logically" (p. 3), leading to "a theory that sex causes, or explains, gender" (p. 4).

As Butler argues, any attempt to define sex as a natural, biological state is inevitably a cultural act, if only because one must choose precisely where to delineate the natural from the cultural (1993:10-12). There is no obvious point at which these categories can be divided, as physiology and culture intertwine and perpetuate one another as part of the construction of gender difference. For instance, the gender disparity we may perceive when it comes to the average amount of body hair or muscle mass a man or woman has is no doubt influenced by various physiological factors,² but also by

² Including ostensibly non-sexual factors, such as a person's ethno-racial background, their access to various sources of nutrition, or the presence of any number of medical conditions (e.g. alopecia).

social choices about things like athletic activities and hair removal practices, as well as by our tendency to pay attention to examples that fit our expectations while erasing those that fail to. This erasure becomes literal through attempts at the surgical elision and elimination of intersex bodies. But the malleability of sex is also of great significance for those with more normative sexual embodiment, considering the way people modify the gendered elements of their bodies constantly through dress, hair style, cosmetics, externally-applied scents, surgery, diet, fitness activities, piercing and tattooing, and so on.

As with gender, some of the best evidence that sex is socially constructed comes from the diversity that can be found across cultures when it comes to how the relationship between gender and the body is understood. And here again some of the most frequently invoked examples of how sex might be differently conceptualized make use of bodies that are situated at the borders of male and female. Gilbert Herdt (1990, 1993) provides a classic example of this type of study in his investigation of an intersex condition known as *5-alpha-reductase deficiency*, which can cause ambiguous or ‘female’-appearing genitals at birth among individuals with XY chromosomes. This particular intersex condition exists in relatively high numbers in certain communities, including parts of the Dominican Republic (where they have been called *guevedoches*, ‘penis-at-twelve’) and among the Sambia in Papua New Guinea (where they are referred to as *kwolu-aatmwol*, which Herdt glosses as “male thing-transforming-into-female thing,” 1990:439). Sexologists writing about the situation in the Dominican Republic prior to Herdt’s work (Imperato-McGinley et al. 1974) had argued that *guevedoches* were typically raised as girls until puberty, at which point physical masculinization occurs and, according to these authors, an innate psycho-biological male identity takes over and motivates individuals to begin identifying with the male role. Herdt’s ethnographic anthropological research among the Sambia, on the other hand, demonstrates that *kwolu-aatmwol* are often placed into a third sex category that corresponds neither to a strictly female nor male social role. Additionally, when *kwolu-aatmwol* do shift from a more feminine social role to a more masculine one, the timing and process of the shift differs markedly from the biologically deterministic picture painted by Julliane Imperato-McGinley and her colleagues, in which pubertal (as well as pre-natal) hormones play a major role. Herdt’s comparison demonstrates how the social interpretation of sexually ambiguous bodies varies depending on contextual factors. In addition to pointing out how the same kinds of biological variation can be interpreted quite differently in different parts of the world, Herdt’s account of the third-sex role recognized by the Sambia certainly differs from the scientific discourses of Western medicine, which treat most forms of intersex embodiment as conditions that mask an individual’s ‘true’ (binary) sex, as mentioned earlier. That is, very few people whose sex is ambiguous at birth are characterized as so-called ‘true hermaphrodites,’ who are neither strictly male nor female. Most are instead diagnosed as either ‘male pseudohermaphrodites’ or ‘female pseudohermaphrodites’ – i.e. males or females that just happen to have intersex conditions that make their sex more difficult to detect. This perspective helps to justify the medical assignment of children into one or the other gender role prior to them gaining the ability to express their own desires or self-identification. The insistence on the relative scarcity of ‘truly’ intersex individuals has not always been dominant, however, and there continues to be significant tension on the matter today (see Sax’s 2002 response to Fausto-Sterling’s claim that as

many as 1.7% of the population might be considered intersex; also Foucault 1980). As we might expect, there is a great deal of variability over time, as well as across cultures.

In fact, one of the most surprising illustrations of the dramatically different ways biological sex can be conceptualized is found in the historical research of Thomas Laqueur (1990). We have seen a few examples of how bodies that challenge the sex binary have been used to make the constructed nature of sex more apparent, but it is important to remember that the process of socially constructing sex occurs as much for individuals who are unambiguously male or female as it does for intersex (or trans) people. Laqueur's work underscores this fact by illustrating the shift toward the male/female binary in both scientific and popular consciousness in the West during the 18th and 19th centuries, which usurped the previously entrenched understanding of men's and women's bodies as fundamentally alike. In the older, single-sex perspective on the body, women were seen for thousands of years as embodying an undeveloped version of the normative male body – inferior, to be sure, but not fundamentally different. This is not to say that no gender binary existed; indeed, the single-sex model coexisted with intense dichotomies between men and women that ascribed different personal characteristics – as well as basic rights – to each gender. But the gender binary was not derived from differences in biological essence; instead, embodied differences were seen as merely one more piece of **evidence** for the more general cosmic difference between women and men, rather than being the **source** of gendered traits (1990:115). According to Laqueur, there existed no “technical term in Latin or Greek, or in the European vernaculars until around 1700, for vagina as the tube or sheath into which its opposite, the penis, fits and through which the infant is born” (p. 5). It wasn't until the beginnings of a new science of gender, which finds sexual difference in nearly every part of the body, that words like *vagina*, *ovary*, and *uterus* became part of the medical lexicon. Considering this history, it's clear that even the basic idea that the penis and vagina are different (let alone opposite) body parts, rather than external and internal versions of the same organ, is the product of a particular culture at a particular point in time. So is the belief that the body comes primarily or exclusively in two types: female and male.

As Butler has addressed (1990, 1993, 2004), none of these arguments about the social construction of sex should be understood as a claim that bodies don't matter (as the title of *Bodies that Matter* tells us quite explicitly). Rather, it is only to say that bodies are social things that receive their meaning in the same way as other cultural signifiers: not from the inherent properties of the object itself, but as emergent from a complex web of social contexts. The ‘maleness’ or ‘femaleness’ of a body part does not derive directly from the material body. Instead, it is imbued with its meaning by the discourse of social actors. In other words, sex does not precede gender; in a very real sense, gender precedes sex.

TRANS BODIES AND BIOLOGICAL SEX

Much like intersex bodies, trans bodies have often been held up as exemplifying the way sex can be constructed and reconstructed. Often, this kind of reconstruction is talked about from a literal perspective, because of the way that medical technology used to reshape the gendered parts of transsexuals' bodies has been such a central part of transsexuality's popular image (reflected in, for instance, Shapiro 1992, Garber 1997,

Hubbard 1998).³ Certainly, many trans people's bodies exhibit striking transformation as part of their gender role transitions; on the other hand, what is even more remarkable is the **social** resignification of these bodies that also takes place. Jay Prosser (1998) has examined the intersection of these two forms of reconstruction – corporeal and cultural – in his analysis of the “body narratives” found in transsexual autobiographies. Prosser invokes and modifies the psychoanalytic notion of a *skin ego*, which represents individuals' psychic experience of their own embodiment (Anzieu 1989), and it is this concept that allows him to explore the question of how transsexuals gain a sense of bodily coherence through surgery – rather than feeling the loss that many non-trans people imagine when they consider such significant sexual modification (cf. Sullivan 2006, Loeb 2008). To take one example, how can a length of skin taken from an individual's forearm, Prosser asks, come to be experienced and understood as part of his penis?⁴ The surgery by itself does not cause this kind of transfiguration. As Prosser argues, the change surgery brings is accomplished in tandem with a person's sense of himself as a man, and crucially depends on him having a sort of psychic penis, like a phantom limb, that is just waiting to be realized in the flesh. The importance of achieving what Prosser calls *gendered realness* and a sense of *home* in the body, both achieved through corporeal change, is so important to so many trans people that he is inclined to criticize the narrow concentration on discourse offered by theorists like Butler. Prosser's point, which forms part of a broad focus on embodiment that characterizes the still-emerging field of trans studies, is that the body is much more than **purely** discourse. This must not be forgotten, particularly given that the body is a site of oppression for so many trans individuals. But I see Prosser's emphasis on literal transformation through genital surgery as limiting, particularly when read over a decade later, for reasons that will become clear as we explore the data that is at the core of this chapter.

Up until now I have avoided directly addressing the relationship between the two possible sources for the shortened form *trans*: *transsexuality* and *transgender*, but at this point it must be attended to in order to clarify what kinds of trans bodies I am talking about. In academic writing, there is a well-established practice of drawing a clear line between these two categories, which is based at least in part on the fact that the word *transgender* originally came about as a response to and critique of the highly normative vision of transsexual identity that had been promoted by critics as well as many trans people themselves (e.g., Shapiro 1992, Stone 1992, Boswell 1998[1991], Stryker 2006[1994], Feinberg 2006[1992]; see Stryker 2008 for more on this history). As transsexuals continued to find themselves the recipients of criticism for their supposedly extreme normative enactments of gender, in the early 1990s scholars of gender turned to a group of people describing themselves as *transgenderists* in the hopes of redeeming trans as a sign of gender subversion and the dissolution of the male/female dichotomy. Transgenderists generally identified with and lived their lives as members of the

³ In fact, much of this technology has been developed for cis (i.e. non-trans) patients, and is readily available to such persons for various purposes. Trans people's access to such treatments, by contrast, is highly regulated (see Edelman, this volume).

⁴ One option for genital surgery for trans men, the phalloplasty, sometimes involves the construction of a penis using skin and nerves from the forearm due to the sensitivity of skin on this part of the body (compared to other potential graft sites, such as the abdomen).

‘opposite’ gender from the one assigned to them at birth, but without making use of the somatic tools of transsexuality.⁵ Because transgenderists were not subjected to the same degree of medical scrutiny as transsexuals, who often need to be certified as ‘truly’ transsexual in order to gain access to hormonal and surgical treatments, this newer identity promised all of subversive power of gender transgression without seeming to reinforce stereotypes about femininity and masculinity in the way transsexuals supposedly did (see Edelman, this volume for more on the alleged conservatism of transsexuals). Foregoing genital surgery, transgenderists very clearly embodied the ‘mismatch’ of biological sex and social gender that seemed so well-suited to dismantling the gender binary.

Importantly, this ‘transgender turn’ arose from within the trans community, and even as transgenderists positioned themselves initially as distinct from transsexuals, in fact it has often been people who could just as easily be classified as transsexuals who have championed the transgender cause (e.g. Stone 1992, Bornstein 1995). In the intervening decades, one might say that the transgender critique has been successful in the sense that there is no longer such a strict divide between those who label themselves *transgender* and those who employ the term *transsexual* – and many people use both. This suggests that many transsexuals today are open to the less normative understanding of gender and embodiment that *transgender* evokes. At the same time, particularly when one focuses on the experiences of those transitioning from female to male, it is clear that there has for many years now been a sizeable contingent of individuals who forego genital surgery but nevertheless see themselves unambiguously as men, despite their lack of conventionally masculine genitals (see Cromwell 1999 from approximately the same time Prosser was writing). Many of these individuals identify simply as “men” rather than “transmen” or some other marked or non-normative gender category, and describe themselves as transsexuals, yet they do not follow the script that is supposedly the unyielding path of transsexuality. In addition to the possibility of foregoing surgical modification of the genitals, there are also several surgical options make use of trans men’s own sexual parts in ways that blur the distinction between ‘male’ and ‘female’ genitals, and between ‘natural’ and ‘constructed’ bodies (more on this point below). Whether or not genital surgery is pursued, the traditional distinction between *transsexual* and *transgender*, which has been based primarily on the extent to which a person changes the sexual characteristics of their body, cannot hold.

As I mentioned above, I believe Prosser goes too far when he claims that “a particular experience of the body [as male] can’t simply transcend (or transubstantiate) the literal” (1998:59); i.e. that discourse can’t override the reality of embodiment. Although it is true that discursive practices cannot “simply” transcend speakers’ literal bodies – indeed, it involves rather complex work – I present below an analysis of trans men’s talk about their genitals that demonstrates that some degree of discursive transcendence is in fact taking place when it comes to the gendered meanings trans men attribute to their own and each other’s bodies. My focus here is on the way language can be employed even in the absence of radical bodily transformation. Yet, as we shall see,

⁵ I use the past tense in discussing transgenderists because the term has fallen out of favor as a label for self-identification over the last two decades. People are more likely to use the adjective *transgender(ed)* instead, though as my discussion in this space suggests, the two words do not have identical semantic content.

trans men's transcendence of their assigned sex is enabled – not inhibited – by the realities of the flesh, as trans men skillfully draw on scientific discourses about the relationship between male and female genitals, as well as the changes that testosterone causes in their bodies, to create a different vision of biological maleness. I show how Butler's conceptualization of sex as derived from discourse is exemplified by the way trans men refuse hegemonic readings of their bodies as female and instead insist on defining themselves as physically, as well as socially, male.⁶ Their perspective carries some commonalities with the one-sex model described by Laqueur, but at the same time it departs radically by recreating the body as a site for self-definition and self-determination.

LINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEX

The research presented in this chapter is not the first to consider the importance of language in creating culturally-specific meanings for the body. As I have already mentioned, some authors who are not overtly concerned with linguistics have nevertheless made language part of their analysis, as when Laqueur draws on the lack of dimorphic technical terminology for the genitals prior to the development of the two-sex perspective on the body. There are also a number of in-depth sociocultural linguistic treatments of the words speakers use for various parts of the gendered body. The work most directly related to my own has been carried out by Deborah Cameron (1992) and Victoria Braun with Celia Kitzinger (2001a, 2001b), who also concentrate on genital terminology. Significantly, the authors in each case uncover misogynistic and heterosexist worldviews underlying these terms, thus demonstrating that the words we use to talk about sex have a great deal to do with how we think about gender. Cameron, for instance, compared metaphorical themes that appeared in terms for the penis produced by two groups of college-aged friends, one made up of men and the other of women. She found that members of the male group tended to metaphorically elevate the penis to awe-inspiring status and, more troublingly, to portray it as a dangerous weapon while the women were more likely to frame the penis as “endearing, ridiculous, and occasionally disgusting” (p. 374). Overall, Cameron's analysis paints a rather bleak picture: “The vision the men's list offers is banal and yet terrible, an experience of masculinity as dominance, femininity as passivity, and sex as conquest” (p. 379; Braun and Kitzinger 2001a reports similar findings). Braun and Kitzinger (2001b) present a similar take on dictionary definitions for *vagina* and *clitoris* as compared to the definitions provided for *penis*. In this case, penises are described as active, functional organs that form the unmarked basis for comparison of other genital parts, such as the clitoris (e.g. in their dataset, the definition of *clitoris* explained this body part as analogous to the penis, but the definition of *penis* made no reference to the clitoris; on the other hand, compare the definitions below). Vaginas and clitorises are described mainly in terms of location rather than function and vaginas in particular are conceptualized as an empty space meant to be the passive recipient of the penis during heterosexual coitus.

⁶ Rosalind Morris (1995) makes a similar argument, directed toward cultural anthropologists, for the importance of symbolic construction as the factor that makes literal embodied transformations (via ritual body modification, for instance) culturally intelligible.

Although he does not deal with talk about genitals, Heiko Motschenbacher (2009) takes a theoretical approach to body part terminology that is closely aligned with my own in that it is driven by a post-structuralist understanding of the body as produced through discourse. In order to avoid the assumption that male and female are relevant analytical categories for organizing speakers or referents, Motschenbacher compares the body part terminology that appears in two magazines that overtly market themselves toward different gender demographics – *Cosmopolitan* and *Men's Health* – in order to reveal the way that different images of normative embodiment are constructed for audiences presumed to be primarily made up of either women or men. Specifically, women's bodies are treated as surfaces for aestheticization, while men's are spoken of primarily as functional organisms, echoing Braun and Kitzinger's (2001b) argument. Motschenbacher's analysis recalls some of the work Laqueur described as part of the construction of a two-sex system, wherein even obviously unisex body parts like eyelashes, muscles, fingernails, or parts of the feet become gendered.

What all of this literature shares is its success in uncovering one of the covert mechanisms that contributes to the making of gender and sexual normativity. From the perspective presented by these authors, language places limitations on the bounds of social possibilities when it comes to the gendering of embodiment. And certainly the publications I have discussed, as well as many others, have shown how language sometimes "gives us intellectual cataracts," as Anne Fausto-Sterling puts it (2000:236). On the other hand, if we are to move beyond the limiting conceptualizations of sex, gender, and sexuality that have been uncovered by this type of scholarship, we need to have some idea of how we might **remake** the meanings attached to the gendered body. Braun and Kitzinger (2001b) briefly suggest some feminist alternatives for each of the problematic themes they identify (namely the binary of active masculinity versus passive femininity, the notion of presence versus absence, and the imposition of heteronormativity). Instead of conceptualizing the penis as active in its penetration of a passive vagina, for instance, a vagina can be spoken of as engulfing a penis, casting this orifice as active in the same way the mouth is. Motschenbacher (2009) too suggests that conventional associations between gender and the body can be broken, particularly when it comes to the embodiment of trans people, who might lead a speaker to refer to a woman's penis or a man's vagina (2009:4). In the section that follows, I expand on these brief references to the possibility of reconstructing sex by detailing an alternative system for gendering the body as found in the discursive practices of many trans men. Contrary to claims that the body cannot be transcended or "reimagined by a discursive mantra," as Vernon Rosario (2004) puts it, I argue that trans men's talk about genital shows how discourse can and does outstrip some of the most basic, commonsense 'facts' about the gendered body. However, I make this claim without suggesting that we should minimize the importance of the body or collapse the notions of gender and sex, but rather that we recognize the shared origins of gender and sex in sociocultural practice.

TRANS MEN'S BODIES

As I have already suggested, corporeality is a hugely important part of trans experience. As Rodrigo Borba and Ana Cristina Ostermann (2009) argue, sociocultural linguists who work with trans communities are wise to incorporate issues surrounding embodiment into our analyses because of the crucial role of the body in the formation of gender variant

identities. Trans people and other gender non-normative groups are very often defined by a purported ‘mis-match’ of biological sex and self-identified gender.

The idea that trans people are individuals whose sex is at odds with their gender assumes a model of sex that is ultimately deterministic. If trans people are always male-bodied women and female-bodied men, this suggests that changing sex is essentially impossible, and that even bodies that have undergone significant change remain fundamentally female or male on the basis of sexual assignment at birth. Even if trans people’s self-identified genders are respected, it often seems that sex is an immutable truth, impervious to self-identification. The habit of referring to non-trans people as *biological men/women* suggests that trans men cannot be truly biologically male, nor can trans women be truly biologically female. It is important to note that this practice can be found among trans speakers themselves. In Jason Cromwell’s (1999) ethnography of a group of trans men, the author – a trans anthropologist – consistently describes his research participants as *female-bodied men*. Bobby Noble (2006) similarly writes in a semi-autobiographical piece that because many trans men opt not to pursue a phalloplasty, which constructs an average adult-sized penis using both genital and non-genital tissue, that (most?) “trans men cannot leave the *trans* behind and become *men*” (p. 98; emphasis in original). His assumption, clearly, is that a penis is a necessary part of being legitimately male, though it seems that at least some trans men may have access to this status if they opt for one particular (and particularly expensive) procedure. Rather than seeing this as a demand placed on trans people by the regulation of bodily normativity, authors such as Marjorie Garber (1997) have claimed that “transsexuals radically and dramatically *essentialize* their genitalia. ‘The absolute insignia of maleness’ [i.e. the penis] *is* for them the index of male identity” (p. 98; emphasis in original).

While this may be true for some trans people, in this space I focus on the way that trans men have in dramatically increasing numbers begun to contest the treatment of their bodies as ‘female,’⁷ and have instead harnessed the linguistic practices already circulating within their communities in order to discursively reconstruct their bodies as entirely and legitimately male. As I mentioned above, it is inappropriate to draw a sharp line between the presumed normative embodiment of transsexuals and the supposedly revolutionary bodies of transgender people (Shapiro 1992) because of the fact that many trans men choose not to use surgery to modify their genitals even as they identify strongly as male and consider themselves transsexual. Many authors discussing female-to-male genital surgery only discuss the phalloplasty option (e.g. Garber 1997, Prosser 1998, Noble 2006) despite the fact that a relatively small number of trans men opt for this procedure (see Cromwell 1999, Rubin 2003, Prosser 1998 for discussion, among others). For many, a phalloplasty is unaffordable and may not provide the desired results;⁸ another surgical

⁷ It is important to note that many trans women engage in similar practices in reference to their own bodies. However, my research up to this point has been primarily among trans men, which enables me to comment in detail on the linguistic practices of this group. Additionally, trans women do seem to have vaginoplasties in greater numbers than trans men have phalloplasties, for a variety of reasons, which in my mind makes trans men uniquely well positioned to demonstrate how discourse can do its work even in the absence of changes to the body.

⁸ Often, authors writing about trans men’s genitals denigrate the results of phalloplasties (generally on the basis of second-hand accounts), referring to them as “inadequate,”

technique, or no surgery at all, may be preferable. The other procedure trans men most frequently use to alter their genitals, which is both more affordable and more common than phalloplasty, is referred to as *metaoidioplasty* (also spelled *metoidioplasty*). *Metas*, as they are also called, are based around a procedure known as *clitoral release*, which allows the patient's existing genitals to stand more freely away from the body and thus to be more phallic in appearance and function. This is facilitated by the fact that testosterone therapy, which is very commonly used by trans men and is often a pre-requisite for metaoidioplasty, causes what doctors call *clitoromegaly*, or enlargement of the clitoris. Metaoidioplasty results are generally smaller than phalloplasties,⁹ and penetration may or may not be possible, but for many individuals this option can allow for more erotic sensation to be retained. For trans men who cannot or choose not to make use of these surgeries, the genital growth provided by hormonal treatment is enough to help some trans men feel more comfortable with their bodies. The various options trans men have to create changes in their embodiment create a continuum of trans male genitals, including those that have been shaped by phalloplasty, metaoidioplasty, and/or testosterone, as well as others that appear entirely 'female.' There is simply no clear line separating trans men who have penises from those who don't. Meanwhile, the various realizations of trans men's genitals have little if any correlation with how these individuals are perceived in their everyday lives. The use of testosterone therapy, which is generally employed with the goal of creating a hormonal balance considered typical for males, is thus the most viable medical intervention for most transsexual men. It is also one of the most profound, because testosterone therapy is often highly effective in producing many of the physical cues associated with masculinity, among them more body and facial hair, enlargement of the larynx (which results in a drop in vocal pitch), and an increase in muscle mass coupled with the redistribution of fat from areas like the hips and thighs to the abdomen. What this means in terms of the semiotics of gender is that many trans men are socially recognized as men, even if they have genitalia that most people would label 'female'.

"non-functional," or having "poor cosmetic results." Some are even less respectful in their descriptions. It seems to me highly problematic to deride another person's genitals as having no function or being somehow objectively unattractive when in fact their function and appearance might suit that individual and/or their sexual partners perfectly. Function (and presumably aesthetic value as well) is often judged on the standards of heteronormative sexuality (e.g. Garber 1997): is coitus possible? How much does the organ visually resemble current genital ideals? Is it too small? The 'wrong' shape? Are there any differences that call attention to the fact that sexual contact falls short of an idealized norm, such as a man needing to insert an erectile rod into the shaft of his penis? (And is it a coincidence that these questions coincide so closely with many non-trans men's anxieties about their own 'normal' genitals?) Different trans men prioritize different goals, such as being able to urinate while standing, retaining full erotic sensation, engaging in insertive intercourse, or having an average sized penis; these differences result in different choices in surgical method, if genital surgery is pursued.

⁹ However, as trans men sometimes point out, the resulting size of around 1-3" is not unheard of among non-trans men, and the condition known as *micropenis* is sometimes cited.

These facts together help us to understand how trans men who have not had genital surgery are able to understand themselves as male-bodied.¹⁰

It is also important to recognize, because of the way trans men draw on scientific discourses to legitimate their discussions of trans genitals, that no truly clear line between penises and clitorises exists to begin with. As sexologists have known for quite some time, these two organs originate from the same prenatal structure and share many morphological features (e.g. the presence of a glans and erectile tissue), and many bodies challenge our ability to categorize all people, or organs, into clear biologically-based categories. Significantly, doctors who ‘treat’ intersex babies and children police the very real overlap that occurs between these body parts by operating on clitorises that are ‘too big’ or penises that are ‘too small’ (Fausto-Sterling 2000:59-60). In a way that again recalls Laqueur’s account of the rise of a two-sex model of gender and the body, the socially-driven erasure of ambiguous bodies props up a binary system that treats male and female genital as fundamentally different – even polar opposites – by nature.

How trans men disrupt the link between gender and the body

As a final step before approaching the linguistic practices through which trans men construct their bodies as male, we must consider more closely the semantic composition of lexical items for genitals as they are conventionally used. While one of the most salient practices trans men engage in when talking about their own and each others bodies involves the coining of new words, such as *bonus hole* or *front hole* to refer to the vagina, the focus of the present analysis is on these speakers’ more subtle reworking of traditional genital terminology. This takes place by disrupting the semantic link that ordinarily exists between genitals and gender. Consider the primary definitions of *vagina* and *penis* found in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition (2006):

vagina: The passage leading from the opening of the vulva to the cervix of the uterus in female mammals.

penis: The male organ of copulation in higher vertebrates, homologous with the clitoris. In mammals, it also serves as the male organ of urinary excretion.

Both of these definitions describe the body part in question in terms of physical structure (i.e. the passage that connects the vulva to the cervix; compare Braun & Kitzinger 2001a) or function (i.e. the organ of copulation and urination). But they also link it to a particular sex or gender category; the vagina is described as occurring in “female mammals” while the penis is a “male organ.” Trans speakers question the reasoning that says particular physiological characteristics are inherently gendered, contesting the assumption that having a penis necessarily makes a body male while having a vagina (or lacking a penis) makes a body female. In strategically aligning themselves with either traditionally masculine or traditionally feminine genital terminology—an alignment that for many speakers shifts depending on the circumstances of talk—trans men are able to accomplish

¹⁰ Many trans men also have surgery to remove breast tissue and reconstruct the chest to have a masculine appearance. These procedures tend to be much more common than genital surgery.

different kinds of interactional work that fulfill the needs of their particular communities of practice.

The data under discussion in this section were collected during the fall of 2007 as part of ongoing participant-observation in a popular internet community geared toward trans men and others on the female-to-male identity spectrum.¹¹ Members of this community use the online forum to discuss a broad range of trans issues, to share information with each other, and to provide support and advice to those going through difficult times. Because of the already mentioned significance of embodiment for trans people, the body is a recurring topic of interest for this group, and the negotiation of how trans men's physiologies should be talked about is commonplace. These discussions are of particular interest for sociocultural linguistic analysis because of the great importance this group places on the use of appropriate and respectful language, the unusually large amount of metalinguistic discourse that takes place, and the heated nature of the disagreements that sometimes occur when notions of acceptable language differ among community members. In order to capture the way these speakers talk about their bodies, I begin with a discussion of the most prominent trend in my data, which is the use of traditionally 'male' terminology in ways that are not sanctioned by their ordinary definitions. However, at times the very same speakers will also employ words generally seen as describing 'female' body parts, yet they do so without undermining their male-bodied status. Below, I explain how this is possible, as well as accounting for the specific contexts that community members selectively deploy this type of language. My analysis is informed by several years of participant-observation in a number of different transgender communities in metropolitan areas in the Western United States as well as English-medium online spaces. The data presented here are drawn from a one month period in 2007 during which time I collected instances of body-part terminology in one of these online communities as part of my regular participation in the group, though I did not engage directly in the conversations under discussion here. During this time, 258 new threads were started in this forum. Each thread contained anywhere from zero to over a hundred separate replies from other users. The posts and comments made to the forum during this time period were read, and entries that contained reference to genitals were isolated and coded according to both the word used and the word's referent. The final data set were selected based on referent rather than word. For example, the word *dick* is sometimes used to refer to a person's body, but other times it refers to a *packer* or *packy* – a type of prosthetic flaccid penis that some trans men wear. Because my interest is in how trans men talk about their own and each other's actual bodies, tokens that did not refer to genital parts in their context of use, as when *dick* was used to refer to a packy, were excluded. The three referents I chose, to use traditional terminology, are 'vaginas,' 'penises,' and 'clitorises,' though, as we will see, the distinction between the latter two organs is blurred in practice. All told, 128 lexical tokens were analyzed, of which 72 referred to penises and/or clitorises and 56 referred to the vagina or other parts of the vulva aside from the clitoris.

¹¹ All examples that appear in this chapter are drawn from postings that are publicly available to anyone with internet access, at least at the time of this writing. However, quotes appear without attribution in order to maintain posters' anonymity to the greatest extent possible.

The most common tactic for talking about gender employed in this community, as well as other communities of trans men that I have had contact with, is to make use of vernacular terminology ordinarily used to describe normative male genitals, such as *dick* or *cock*, to refer to trans men’s external genitals (i.e. the ‘clitoris’). This language is generally not intended in a playful, fantastic, or metaphorical way – a great deal of trans men describe themselves matter-of-factly as having a dick, even if they have not modified their genitals with surgery. To give a sense of the distribution of word choices in my data, table 1 shows the frequency of the most commonly occurring lexical items for external genitals. *Dick* appears most frequently, and is often used in reference to trans men’s bodies, but also in reference to non-trans men. Some tokens had non-specific or generic referents, as when one commenter questioned an idea that is often tossed around among trans men when discussing what size packer is most appropriate: “i don’t understand the idea that shorter men need to look like they have smaller dicks. there is no link between penis size and height.” In this comment, the *dicks* being talked about belong to unspecified short men, who could potentially be trans or not. *Cock* follows a similar pattern to *dick*, though it is slightly less common in this small corpus.

Table 1: Common terminology for external genitals

	<u>Trans male genitals</u>	<u>Non-trans male genitals</u>	<u>Female genitals</u>	<u>Unspecified/ generic</u>	<u>Total tokens</u>
<i>dick</i>	16	6	0	5	26
<i>cock</i>	9	2	0	1	12
<i>penis</i>	2*	1	0	8	11
<i>clit(oris)</i>	0	0	2	4	6
<i>dic-clit</i>	3	0	0	0	3
Euphemisms	8	0	0	0	8
Misc. masculine	6	0	0	0	6

Penis, on the other hand, has a somewhat different scope. While there are two instances of this word that refer to a trans man’s body, in both cases they are specifically in reference to the post-surgical results of a phalloplasty. My suggestion is that this is part of a broader tendency among trans men to use vernacular – rather than medical – ‘male’ language when talking about their (usually hormonally-enlarged) phalluses. To account for this fact, it seems to me important to remember the way that many trans men invoke scientific discourses to legitimate their emphasis on the continuum between penises and clitorises, as I have discussed. Some of these individuals may not be willing to dismiss scientific and medical authority all together, and might feel that claiming a *penis*, rather than a *dick*, is a riskier assertion, open to rebuttal from authoritative sources.

Clitoris, following another pattern, was used in these data in only two kinds of contexts: in reference to women’s bodies or in reference to a generic body that may belong to either a trans man or a cis woman. The latter type of referent can be seen in a comment that describes a genital piercing known as a *triangle* using the phrase *the clitoral shaft* (example 1), rather than referring to any specific person’s clitoris. Note too the juxtaposition of *clitoral* and *shaft*, a common phrase in piercing terminology but also one that highlights the relationship between penises and clitorises, whether or not this was the intention of the speaker. Though the individual who wrote the comment in (1) is

not trans himself,¹² his word choice suggests an awareness of the sensitivity required during the deployment of gendered language in this space.

1. *Since triangles are positioned behind the clitoral shaft, any growth you've got from being on T may limit whether there's enough room for the piercing.*¹³

Another word that appeared in one discussion thread, which falls somewhere between conventionally masculine or feminine language, is *dic-clit*.¹⁴ This term has a fairly long history in communities of trans men. In the late 1990s, when I had my first contact with trans communities, this term was in wide circulation in online contexts. In recent years, however, this term has fallen out of use, and today, trans men are far more likely to simply refer to their *dicks*, rather than blending the word with *clit*. In fact, the single individual in my data who used the word *dic-clit* was only just reconnecting with trans communities after a long period of absence – which took place precisely during the time that this shift occurred. His use of *dic-clit* was quickly objected to by a commenter who found the blend inappropriately feminizing, writing that “there is no reason to use female terms to refer to trans men, pre-t or not.” The movement among trans speakers away from *dic-clit* and toward *dick* has occurred in lockstep with the growing tendency for trans men to describe themselves as male-bodied, and with the diminishing acceptance of describing non-trans men as *biological men*, a term that occurred only once in my data despite its relative prominence among trans people in the past (*non-trans* or *cis* are generally preferred as ways to refer to those who aren't trans).

Finally, some community members used more creative, amusing, or unusual language including *down there*, *this part of the body*, and *peepee* (all coded as euphemisms in Table 1), as well as *package*, *the little guy*, *dangle*, *schlong*, *weenie*, and *prick* (coded as miscellaneous masculine terms in Table 1). For talking about external genitals in particular, it's clear that masculine or gender neutral language is the norm.

In all of these cases, when trans men opt to describe themselves with ‘male’ genital terminology, they construct themselves as male-bodied, and they accomplish this by de-coupling the gendered element of the semantics of these words from their physiological component. For these speakers a *dick* is not, as the *American Heritage Dictionary* claims for *penis*, defined as an organ of urination and copulation. It is defined by its gendered meaning. In the semantic system created by trans people, *dick* is a word that refers to a man's genitals, regardless of how they might look or work. And this is the basic value at the core of many trans people's system for understanding biological sex: male and female bodies are not defined by their corporeal realizations, but by the gendered subjectivities of those who animates them. A man's body is simply the body of a man, no matter its shape or appearance.¹⁵

¹² Many people who consider themselves allies to the trans community participate in this online forum, though members hold outsiders to high standards when it comes to using language preferred by the in-group.

¹³ *T* is an abbreviation for *testosterone*, commonly used by trans men to masculinize their bodies.

¹⁴ This has also been spelled *diclit*, *dicklet*, and similarly by other speakers.

¹⁵ Shortly after the completion of this chapter, I talked with one trans man participating in my dissertation research about his preferred language for his body. He expressed to me

The linguistic practices I have thus far described create what Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have identified as *adequation*, or “sufficient similarity,” between transsexual men’s bodies and those of non-trans men. This can be seen even more clearly when examine the way non-trans men’s genitals are discussed, as examples 2 and 3 illustrate. Rather than using unmarked language to refer to non-trans men and their bodies, such as simply *men* or *dicks*, members of this community consistently use qualified phrases like *non-trans dicks* and the amusing *factory direct dicks*, making clear that non-trans men’s penises are only one type of male genitals. By emphasizing the similarities between their own bodies and those of non-trans men, while demoting the significance of any differences that might exist, members of this community reframe the difference between trans genitals and normative male bodies as primarily a matter of size rather than gender.¹⁶

2. *do you have much experience with factory direct dicks?*
3. *I can't say that I have a lot of experience hold and feeling non-trans dicks.*¹⁷

This way of speaking is a linguistic enactment of a more general philosophy that can be found in many trans communities: that there is no significant, categorical difference between trans and non-trans men or between trans and non-trans women that marks trans people as less authentic or real than their non-trans counterparts. Members of this community rarely make overt reference to the idea that sex is socially constructed (in contrast to gender, which they often describe as a construction). But the practice of using the same vocabulary to talk about both trans and non-trans men’s genitals breaks down the naturalization of sex in two ways: first, by suggesting that there may not be a clear line between female and male bodies, and second, by implying that it is social gender identity that in a sense determines biological sex, rather than vice versa. Thus, we can view these speakers’ defiant reworking of genital terms as accomplishing one of the primary projects of many trans communities: to place self-identification at the core of legitimate and authentic gender – and sex as well.

However, there are also instances in which traditionally ‘female’ terminology is used, sometimes by the same speakers who also talk about themselves as having *dicks* or *cocks*. How can trans men make use of lexical items like *vagina*, *cunt*, or *G-spot* (each of which occur in my data) without undermining their status as male-bodied, rather than female-bodied, men? As I suggested earlier, there are uniquely trans alternatives such as *front hole* in place of *vagina*, but even with these options available some speakers still opt

that he was not “cock-identified,” meaning that he does not refer to his genitals using words like *cock*. Ultimately, however, he shares the same emphasis on self-identification as other trans men who do refer to their *cocks*, and stressed that he has no difficulty seeing other trans men’s genitals as cocks according to their own self-definition.

¹⁶ A documentary about trans men’s sexuality, *Enough Man* (Woodward 2006), includes a comment from one of the film’s participants on this issue. As he puts it, “I might be hung like a gerbil, but I’ve got a cock.”

¹⁷ All examples appear as originally posted, including any typos, misspellings, and so forth.

for potentially feminizing word choices. I argue this becomes possible through the very same process I have just discussed, in which the gendered meanings of genital words are de-coupled from their physiological entailments. However, in these cases it is the gendered semantic element that is de-emphasized so that a *vagina* can be expected to have certain structural properties, but may be found on men's bodies as well as woman's. The clearest indication of this is the way masculinizing modifiers are attached to 'female' genitals terms. In example 4, the speaker refers to his *boy cunt* (which can also be spelled *boycunt*), making it clear that although he describes himself as having a *cunt*, it doesn't undermine his masculinity. His cunt is a boy's cunt. Although they do not appear in this particular data set, I have heard other trans men also talk about having a *boy-pussy*, *man-cunt*, *boy-snatch*, or even the self-consciously comical blend *mangina*.

4. *it had been over 4 weeks since i wanted to be extra safe and was being extra sensitive about my boy cunt.*

Taking a slightly different approach, another poster who was soliciting support for the dysphoria¹⁸ he was experiencing in relation to his body (example 5) asked whether he was the only community member "filled with immense hatred over his vagina." By using the third-person masculine possessive pronoun to modify *vagina* (i.e. "his vagina") rather than formulating a sentence that used the first or second person possessive pronouns (i.e. 'my vagina' or 'your vagina'), the speaker makes it clear that he is talking about the problems faced by men, not women, who hate their vaginas.

5. *I'm not the only one that is filled with immense hatred over his vagina, am I?*

Even as the use of feminine terminology is undoubtedly a part of the linguistic practices of this community, such uses are clearly marked and also seem to be constrained to particular types of contexts. Three contexts that were particularly prominent in my data were 1) in technical talk about the body, e.g. discussions of surgery, health problems, or even body piercings, 2) as part of expressions of body discomfort, and 3) as part of re-claiming and sexualizing body parts that many trans men distance themselves from. In each of these contexts, trans men sometimes make use of institutionally-sanctioned language for describing their body, but they do not align with the assumption that this type of language refers only to female-bodied individuals (a point I return to at the end of this section).

Looking at the way trans men talk about their bodies in technical, scientific, or medicalized perspective, it's clear that 'female' language occurs rather frequently in these contexts. The comments that are shown in examples 6-8 contain the words *vagina(l)*, *vulva*, and *hood* (i.e. the clitoral hood), in each case contextualized within some kind of specialized technical jargon.

¹⁸ *Gender dysphoria* (often shortened to simply *dysphoria*) is a clinical term that refers to profound discomfort, disidentification, or unhappiness with one's assigned sex or gender. It has also been adopted by many trans people as a way of talking about this set of feelings.

6. [When performing a phalloplasty,] *other surgeons leave the vagina (which is to say, the vaginal opening, not the vulva in its entirety) which is then located behind the scrotum.*
7. *i'm actually supposed to get a ...blargh trans-vaginal ultrasound of my uterus and i've been putting it off like crazy.*
8. *i used to have a vertical hood ring but it looked strange after T took hold.*

In the case of example 6, a community member is explaining one of the methods surgeons use when performing phalloplasties. Because the function of this comment is in large part to provide information about this technique to those who lack it, the speaker's choice to use the same language that a surgeon might use (*vagina*, *vulva*, as well as *scrotum*) may be a matter of facilitating comprehension. The same could be said of example 7 – trans men have ways of talking about vaginas without using that particular word, but talking about a *trans-front-hole ultrasound* seems like an unlikely choice based on the patterns in these data. In example 8, another poster talks about a genital piercing he had prior to testosterone therapy, which is called a *vertical hood* by body modification practitioners because it passes through the clitoral hood vertically. However, beyond making these utterances easier to understand, this practice also falls into the more general trend I have identified of yielding to scientific authority when it comes to more formal, rather than vernacular, lexical items (e.g. *penis* as discussed above). Importantly, in some situations speakers make it clear that they are uncomfortable with certain words even as they use them – as in example 7, wherein the use of ellipses, followed by the exclamation “blargh,” mark a stance of reluctance to use the word that follows (“a ...blargh trans-vaginal ultrasound”).

Discomfort with the body itself also seems to serve as a motivator to use traditionally ‘female’ terminology, when trans-specific terms like *front/bonus hole* could have just as easily been chosen. In my data set, the word *vagina* was the most common term to refer to this body part, but it is worth noting that even though 33 tokens of this word and its derivations (e.g. *vaginal*) appeared, they were confined to only two separate threads (out of 258). 23 of the 33 tokens of *vagina* were found in a single discussion thread, which began with the question found in example 5 and repeated as example 9: *I'm not the only one that is filled with immense hatred over his vagina, am I?* A similar usage, from the same thread, is found in example 10: *I feel utter revulsion towards my vagina.*

9. *I'm not the only one that is filled with immense hatred [sic] over his vagina, am I?*
10. *I feel utter revulsion towards my vagina.*

Some trans men experience intense discomfort with their genitals, due at least in part to the compulsory gendering of *vagina* as a necessarily female body part. If a speaker is focused on expressing this dysphoria, ‘female’ language may function as a kind of icon for unhappiness about the ‘female’ aspects of a speaker’s body. These speakers are not upset about having a *front hole* – what they’re distressed about is having a *vagina* and the

concomitant social implications, even though these terms appear to point to the same referent. This way of speaking illustrates my point that the choice between various gendered terms of reference for genitals can accomplish different kinds of interactional work within the community. When speakers are expressing their hatred toward their own bodies, what they are accomplishing socially is quite different from the more trans-affirmative functions I discussed in my analysis of ‘male’ terminology, and from the use of ‘female’ terminology in technical talk about the body. Instead of focusing on sharing information, these discussions elicit emotional support and the sharing of similar experiences, building communities ties that can be crucial lifelines for those without contact with trans communities in their local areas.

The final context that frequently evoked the use of ‘female’ language in the data set in question was in talk about sex. To be sure, ‘male’ language is extremely common in these situations, as elsewhere, but this is also one of the few places in which vernacular ‘female’ terms like *cunt* appear. The best example of this trend was in a thread started by a poster who wanted advice on cramps he experienced after vaginal penetration following a colposcopy procedure.¹⁹

11. *so last night i had i had my cunt penetrated for the first time since my colposcopy.*

This comment, which was written by the same poster who made use of the term *boy cunt* (see example 4), involves a discussion of a medical procedure, but the word *cunt* appears in an account of a sex act – the speaker “had [his] cunt penetrated” (he does not, by contrast, talk about the medical procedure as involving an examination of his cervix via his *cunt*). Words like *cunt* or *pussy* seem to appear primarily when speakers are speaking about relatively positive sexual experiences – members do not talk about feeling uncomfortable with having a *cunt*, but about enjoying this body part. Elijah Edelman (personal communication) similarly finds that trans men advertising for sex in online cruising spaces for queer men will commonly describe their bodies using words that are normally marked, if not stigmatized, in trans-centered contexts. Certain sex acts themselves carry stigma among some trans men, for whom being on the receptive side of penetration, particularly vaginal penetration, is emasculating. However, it seems that as time marches on more and more trans men (and non-trans men, as well)²⁰ have been open to the idea that liking to be penetrated does not undermine one’s status as a ‘real man’, nor as a legitimate transsexual (despite the fact that diagnostic criteria traditionally emphasized that ‘true transsexuals’ despise their unaltered bodies and refuse sexual contact). Reclaiming sexualized language for body parts that transsexuals are supposed to hate is a reflection of the way many trans people have reclaimed the parts themselves as a source of pleasure, even if they are simultaneously a source of pain, discomfort, or dissatisfaction. Importantly, the fact that the very same speaker produced both *cunt* and *boy cunt* in the same post illustrates my claim that using this type of language need not undermines trans men’s claims to being male-bodied. A man may have a *cunt*, from this

¹⁹ A colposcopy involves examining the cervix with a device that is inserted vaginally.

²⁰ As suggested by the creation of the term *pegging*, in the sex advice column Savage Love, to refer to sex in which a woman penetrates a man with a strap-on dildo.

perspective, but that doesn't make him any less male – it just means that members of this community allow for a large range of body types that can be categorized as 'male.'

Transsexual men navigate choices between male and female genital terminology, including both vernacular and more medical options, without allowing any of these choices to undermine their identities as male-bodied men. The lexical items used by these speakers in reference to their genitals also facilitate the social work in which speakers are engaged, whether sharing medical information, providing or asking for support during times of distress and sadness, or reconceptualizing trans men's bodies as sites of sexual pleasure. However, the most fundamental project that members of this community are engaged in is asserting the unmitigated legitimacy of transsexual men's self-identification as men. The tactical claiming of 'male' terminology in reference to body parts often seen as female, together with the refashioning of 'female' terminology so that it can refer to men, works to construct trans men as male-bodied despite the powerful nature of discourses that insist otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps more than any other aspect of language, the lexicon is available for metalinguistic reflection. As Michael Silverstein (1981) has noted, words are above the "level of awareness," and this leaves them available to be consciously chosen, rejected, changed, and commented on. This availability is part of why variationist sociolinguists have often emphasized other aspects of speakers' language use – such as particular pronunciations or grammatical constructions – in their efforts to uncover the profoundly systematic nature of vernacular language. In language and sexuality studies in particular there has been some contention over whether the "lavender lexicon" (in Leap's 1995 words) is a useful realm of investigation. In light of the data presented in this chapter, it seems crucial to recognize that the metalinguistic awareness speakers have when it comes to words is precisely what makes the lexicon a powerful tool of social change: people can choose how to use words, others are likely to notice, and in-depth analysis can be cooperatively produced in ways that at times seem quite effortless. One can see this process at work among early language and gender researchers who made linguistic androcentrism – particularly in the form of words like *man(kind)*, the generic masculine pronoun, and unequal forms of address for men and women (e.g. *Mr.* versus *Mrs./Miss*) – a concrete front on which to battle gender-based oppression, with some real success (see many of the essays in Cameron 1998; also McConnell-Ginet 2003 on the term *queer*). At the same time, the sometimes mixed outcome of the feminist revolution – so far, that is – reminds us that language planning rarely goes exactly as intended.

Even so, let us be cautious in ascribing intent, because the now familiar tropes about trans people's subversion of the gender binary – or their failure to do so – are not warranted here. This chapter is more fundamentally about mind and body, what happens when they are torn apart, and how they can be mended back together. It is not an argument to dispense with the analytical categories of gender and sex, nor as a claim that the trans speakers I have discussed here would advocate such a deconstruction. In addition to being a useful way of dislodging biological essentialism, a conceptual distinction between gender and sex is crucial for the way many trans people articulate a self-identified internally-felt gender that is separate from their assigned sex. Over time, though, many trans people have become uncomfortable with a system that treats only

non-trans people as biologically, **naturally**, male or female and implies that however a trans person might change or experience his or her body, it will never be quite like the real thing.

Instead of consenting to the insistence of doctors and dictionaries that certain physiological characteristics makes a person female-bodied, the trans men whose talk I've highlighted here destabilize the boundaries between male and female embodiment by de-coupling gender and body while making both a matter of self-determination. Social scientists have often remarked on the fact that our fields can learn from trans people because of the way their experiences press us to consider what it means to be a man or a woman, and what the limits of these categories are. But perhaps there is something else we can learn as well: something about the possibilities that are created when we reclaim authority over our own bodies – something about empowerment. As important as it is to recognize the oppressive power of language, particularly when subjugation disguises itself as nature and common sense as it so often does, we must go further. The next step is to discover how these systems can be remade.

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