

Personal Narratives

The Women's Movement and the Trans Movement: Unnecessarily at Odds

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Abstract. This article investigates male to female transition and its potential negative impacts on the born-women community. There has been much discussion about the Women's Movement and the Trans Movement working together as a progressive force, but there is reason to believe that the two movements are at odds with each other. The essay, using experience from an intro women and gender studies online course, e-article draws on contemporary instances from real life and television, as well as speculative fiction to demonstrate how the Trans Movement is counterproductive to the advancement of Women's Liberation. The author and suggest touches on how societal gender divisions have forced individuals who do not fit perfectly into their assigned genders to abandon them completely.

An Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course in which I was a student in the Spring of 2019 at Virginia Tech covered an extensive list of topics which included discussions regarding differences between sex and gender, motivating factors behind the desire for male-to-female physical transitions, and the impact of these transitions on pre-existing feminist movements ("Welcome to Intro to WGS," 2019). These discussions helped me critically analyze, reflect on, and unravel my personal thoughts and beliefs, and in turn, nurture a more intimate relationship with myself and my understanding of womanhood.

I soon realized an important difference of opinion between myself and my classmates. Most of the class believed that the Women's Movement and the Trans Movement work together as a progressive force as opposed to working against each other. Most students expressed concerns about the prejudice and discrimination faced by transpersons, and an *Orange is the New Black* episode we watched in class shed light on this aspect. In the episode, Sophia, a born-male transperson, is denied her hormones in prison. She sits in the mirror gazing at the physical indicators of her femininity slipping away, worried about whether the prison will grant her ~~the~~ hormones ~~she~~ *she needs*. In another episode we watched in class, Sophia faces backlash from her wife, Crystal, regarding her transition. Crystal expresses her disappointment when she states, "I married a man named Marcus. I cry for him all the time. But I stayed and I supported you because I could see how much pain you were in ... *SoSo*, I put up with you becoming a woman." Crystal displays an unwilling and reluctant acceptance, stating that she had to "put up with" Sophia becoming a woman.

These concerns of discrimination, prejudice, and criticism towards transpersons seem to dominate the views of many young people today. However, my understanding is quite different ~~from than~~ that of my classmates. It seems to me that the Women's Movement and the Trans Movement are at great odds with each other.

The course took place in an online setting and was heavily based on virtual discussions between students, facilitated by the professor. Every week, the professor posted two discussion prompts and students were required to post five responses to each. Only six out of the forty-four

students in the classroom were male, and eleven out of forty-four students were ~~minorities or~~ students of color. I was surprised to learn that none of the other female students speculated that the Women's Movement and the Trans Movement ~~each~~ may possibly be ~~in conflict at odds with~~ ~~each other~~.

There have been multiple instances of born-male transpersons being cast in a brighter light than born-women, both by themselves and the wider society. Take, for example, Bruce Jenner's transition into becoming Caitlyn Jenner and subsequently being named *Glamour* magazine's "Woman of the Year," which prompted jokes such as the title of the following article: "Sorry, Ladies. Apparently, Caitlyn Jenner Proves Men Are Even Superior at Being Women" (Shapiro 2015). Twitter user @Zach_Flint/Zach Flint echoed the same sentiments in his 2015 tweet stating, "Caitlyn Jenner being woman of the year just proves that men are better at everything, even being women" (Gonzalez 2015). Such reactions should not come as a surprise; by appointing Jenner as *Glamour* Woman of the Year, the magazine propagates the belief that men are better at being women than born-women themselves.

In another example, born-male transpersons have been increasingly making their way onto all-girls sports teams and overshadowing the accomplishments of born-girls. Born-male transgender athletes have been hailed as champions and have impeded born-girls' opportunities to earn athletic scholarships (Murphy 2019).

More explicit declarations that trans-women are better than born-women can be found on blogs. A Reddit user explained that when compared to born-women, trans-women are more attractive, tend to have less body fat, are leaner, tend to have more of a traditional beauty, and age slower. The user also explained that transgender women are born as men, and therefore know that it is difficult being a man, despite the false claims of feminists (Reddit 2018).

Samuel Delany's excerpt from *Trouble on Triton*, which we covered in the class, also explored how born-male transpersons consider themselves to be better women. In *Trouble on Triton*, Bron is a genetic male living on ~~a moon named~~ Triton, ~~a moon~~. On Triton, ~~which is a moon~~, residents live in co-ops or communes differentiated by their sexual preferences. Bron lives in a single-gender non-specified commune where males of all sexual orientation or preferences are permitted to reside. While Bron has a preference for heterosexuality, he is capable of bisexuality as well. He believes that only men can exhibit bravery and acting outside of society for the greater good of the majority, due to an aloneness that is specific only to men. He then believes that women are ingrained in the relational webs of society, thus incapable of acting impartially for the greater good. Bron believes his impartiality and aloneness, qualities unique to born-males, afford him the power to save the female race.

In the passage, Bron explicitly states that he does not believe men are inferior to or worse than women. He does not struggle with inner femininity and is not one who believes he would be better psychologically suited in a female body. He explains that he simply wants to be a woman, physically, genetically, and hormonally (Delany 94,95). Bron's belief that bravery is a characteristic only possessed by males, and that only men have the power to act outside society for the good of the majority along with his perceived need to infiltrate the female race in order to save it with logic, objectivity, and bravery is the driving force behind his transition from male to female.

This is a perfect illustration of the privilege that Lawrence, the wise old man in *Trouble on Triton*, discusses in the excerpt. Lawrence is seventy-four years of age and gay, and his

intermediary status allows him a deeper understanding of sex and gender expression (Delany 80). Lawrence explains to Bron that the impact of being born and raised in a society that privileges males cannot easily be unlearned, especially by genetic males (Delaney 90). However, as indicated by Bron's response to Lawrence when asked why he transitioned to a female, the privilege afforded to males by a male dominated society can also be seen as a burden imposed upon them by society. After his sex change procedure, Bron explains to Lawrence that there are certain things that must be done: "if you're a man ... you just have to do them" (PAGE 101-), speaking of his sex change. This is evidence of Bron's misconstrued perception that it is his duty to undergo a male-to-female transition to become the ideal woman because in his view, no ideal women exist. He explains to Lawrence that he felt as though the transition is something he simply had to do because it is his responsibility as a male. Bron is driven to become a woman because he feels as though the women that already exist are incapable of understanding men. He believes that the qualities he possesses, such as aloneness, along with his male experience would give him the prospect of becoming a woman capable of understanding men. He believes that he would be an ideal woman with the ability to understand the male's struggles and loneliness because he has previously been a man himself. Essentially, Bron views his previous male experience as a cheat code or the secret ingredient in creating the ideal woman.

Prior to his sex change, Bron paid a visit to his boss Audri and her children following a disaster on Triton to check up on them. Upon his arrival there, he noticed a man screaming and pounding at the window, demanding that his children be handed over to him. The women living in the co-op did not open the door nor acknowledge the man's demands (89-90). Speaking with Lawrence after his sex change regarding this incident, Bron asserts that he tried to save the children and their mothers because he thought he was saving humanity. He expresses that he was certainly not doing so for himself and that he was indeed uncomfortable in [that context/environment](#). He explains that he wanted to keep turning away but did not do so because of his perceived responsibility delegated to him by the patriarchal society (101). After his transition, Bron states to Lawrence that the only thing that gives the species value is because of those similar to him, who can do the things he used to do when he was a man. Essentially, Bron claims that only men provide true meaning to humanity by their courageous acts and impartiality. He proudly acknowledges what he had been through during the war and the bravery that was required of him at that time, boasting that such experiences taught him the meaning of true manhood. He confidently states that he no longer must be modest about the greatness he accomplished while he was a man since he is now a woman (102).

Bron truly cannot unlearn the perceived responsibilities or obligations he feels he must fulfill, ones that can be regarded as both a privilege afforded to him by a male dominated society, but also a burden. Bron believes that it is his responsibility to save those mothers and children, even though doing so made him uncomfortable. This is symbolic of many things that men must do today because they feel responsible as male members of society to do so. For example, men might feel like they have to work to provide for their wives and children and act as the "breadwinners" of the family despite the fact that their wives are able-bodied and capable of work themselves. Bron believes that because he understands the responsibility of males and the loneliness that comes with that responsibility, he will be a better woman than the women who already exist, as women will never understand males' responsibility. He believes his previous experience as a male makes him the ideal woman, at least in his opinion.

However, Bron's belief that he is the ideal woman because he has previously had a male experience is flawed and yet another example of the propagation of male dominated ideals. It is an example of how men believe that born-women will only be good or perfect or ideal women if and only if they understand the struggles and the loneliness of men, a requirement imposed on born-women by the patriarchal society. Although the piece claims that born-women are tangled in relational webs of society, Bron places yet another relational constraint on women by defining an ideal woman as one who has had a male experience in the past.

Taking on a female body as a born-male does not necessarily make the born-male more attuned to what a born-woman could express externally; convoluted internal thoughts and workings of a woman determine what she expresses externally. However, it is possible that it could make a born-male more attuned with what born-women are expected to be in the culture and how they are to present themselves. Because born-women live in a patriarchal society governed by male dominated ideals and beliefs, a male experience would be helpful in this case. A born-male would be able to utilize his male experience to behave in a manner that matches the perception of an ideal woman in the patriarchal society's eyes. However, the only reason taking on a female body as a born-male would make a born-male more attuned with what born-women are expected to be in the culture is because what born-women are expected to be in the culture has been defined and structured by males and male dominated principles.

Although *Trouble on Triton* is perhaps the most imaginative in its rendering of the matter we are examining, recent depictions in realistic popular culture, such as *Orange is the New Black*, have reflected this as well. Often, individuals making male-to-female transitions pursue an end result of dressing in traditionally feminine styles for this culture with bright colors, tight fitted or body-accentuating clothing, long hair, detailed makeup, manicures, and pedicures; talking in feminine high pitched voices aided by hormonal therapy; and taking on a male-defined idyllic female body with large breasts and butts. Down to their body language, everything becomes stereotypically female within male-defined ideals. When males transition to females, most often they depict an identity that could be characterized as "extreme feminine." They emphasize and particularly highlight their feminine attributes. Being able to do so may provide the individuals with a sense of internal freedom and comfort in their own skin, but these transformations have the ability to reinforce the standards that born-women try to liberate themselves from every day. We as born-women continuously try to break free of the unreasonable beauty standards imposed upon us and want to be viewed as equal beings when pitted against males. When you have these instances of males becoming females only to display stereotypically feminine traits, it magnifies the issue we are working against.

Perhaps unintentionally, born-male transpersons and the Trans Movement can be seen as harmful to born-women's liberation and advancement. In response to a student who stated that the Trans movement has positively contributed to born-women's liberation, the professor provided additional research to allow room for further speculation. She mentioned instances of lesbians attacked by transpersons at the San Francisco Dyke march and instances of jobs at women's health centers being overtaken by transpersons. She stated that to avoid losing funding a pre-term abortion clinic in Cleveland is no longer able to advertise itself as a women's health clinic, since the term excludes men who felt as though they were women (although not in women's bodies). Similarly, performances and fundraisers of *Vagina Monologues* could no longer be performed because male-to-female transpersons without vaginas claimed that they felt

excluded (Slagter-2018) and **Wwomyn**'s music festivals that created safe spaces for women-born-women for forty years were shut down due to petitions and lawsuits filed by trans groups (Abbey-Lambertz, 2016). Further, the professor mentioned that when a job position of administrating the consciousness-raising groups at a local women's community center in another city was given to a trans woman, the pre-teen and teenage born-female girls no longer wanted to participate in consciousness raising discussions regarding sexuality, puberty, first menstruation, breast development, pregnancy, contraception and so on with a born-male who inherently shared neither the same biological composition nor experiences. There are also examples of intentionally violent and vulgar threats towards specific women's advancement groups, such as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists. On terfisaslur.com, countless statements along the lines of "Kill all TERFs," "All TERFs deserve to be shot in the head," "Enjoy my ladydick in your mouth," "Hey TERFs, suck my f***ng tranny dick," appear. Such hostile indifference perpetuated by some transpersons towards born-women even led to born-women feeling obliged to conceal their whereabouts to avoid attacks, harassment, and to prevent the shutting down or cancellation of born-women only gatherings and events (Goldberg-2014).

With the ongoing issues of racism, discrimination, and oppression in our country, society has become extremely sensitized. Individuals are much more attuned to how others may feel and try their best not to offend them. However, this increased sensitization to matters seems to have been misinterpreted, and we see an example of that with the Trans Movement. To provide a small example, I believe that women's restrooms should be preserved for women-born-women only (not to assert that transpersons do not deserve their own safe spaces). However, society and trans-activist groups have been pushing for born-male-to-female transpersons to be permitted in this women-only space. Restrooms are locations where intimate processes and interactions occur, especially for women. Born-women cannot simply stand over a urinal holding their vaginas next to multiple other women in order to relieve themselves. Born-women must deal with menstruation, breastfeeding, changing children's diapers, and more. Born-women desire and require a certain degree of privacy, which is something only women-born-women would understand. This privacy is being actively violated by transpersons. Further, born-women have the ability to bring life into earth and the knowledge to nurture it. There are certain things that born-women experience that only women-born-women will understand, and for transpersons to claim that they are "women" and identify with an identity that we have been working so hard to protect and advance is a grave violation to Women's Liberation. Transpersons could easily express their femininity or masculinity, whichever it may be, without infringing upon the advancements born-women have made over the years by not forcibly categorizing themselves as women. Instead, the trans-movement is setting the Women's Liberation movement back. In the struggle for its own advancement, the Trans Movement is robbing us of our identities and born-women-only safe spaces.

There is a reason that *Vagina Monologues* are named what they are; they are meant to appeal to women who were born as women, not males who feel that they can classify themselves as women because they feel uncomfortable within their own bodies. It is perfectly acceptable and worthy of celebration for males to express their femininity, but for them to claim that they feel excluded when it comes to events like *Vagina Monologues*, and shut down **Wwomyn**'s music festivals due to lawsuits, is an explicit display of men interjecting themselves into women-only aspects and spaces of life in order to fundamentally restructure them or do away with them

entirely. My professor posed the following question that deeply resonated with me: “some people who were men felt the need to change their self-presentation and physical bodies if they could, but why did they feel the need to take over and even shut down existing women’s spaces, even spaces where existing women had chosen to be more androgynous?” Transpersons should work towards creating their own safe spaces just instead of obliterating the ones that women have toiled for decades to create.

It is unfortunate to think about the gender distinctions that have become so permanently ingrained in our society. Not surprisingly, this has been accompanied by disastrous **effectsconsequences**. Individuals who do not feel comfortable with their assigned gender experience dysmorphia and feel as though they must make drastic changes to their natural bodies in order for their internal mind, body, and self to be in accordance with their external mind, body, and self. The hardline gender divisions that we have created and perpetuated have effectively stigmatized the display of femininity on behalf of born-males, and the display of masculinity on behalf of born-females. Resultingly, born-males who may identify more with their femininity as opposed to their masculinity feel trapped in their assigned gender and search for means to escape it. Instead of integrating their femininity into their assigned male gender, for which they fear facing backlash and criticism, born-males opt to abandon their assigned gender in its entirety and digress into the other gender. The same can be stated for born-females who identify more with their masculinity.

To prevent the dampening of Women’s Liberation and advancement of born-females, we must divert from assessing bodily gender and external gender performance against stereotypical social gender norms, and refrain from following the unspoken rule that we must adhere to these gender norms (Fambrough 106). This diversion would allow for increasingly diverse expressions of biological sex and would take into account gender identity. Individuals would be able to better be themselves, as opposed to having to confine themselves to a specific gender accompanied by oppressing pronouns (*loc. cit. Fambrough 106*). We must cultivate a society in which members are accepting of differences in gender expressions, physical appearances, and sexual orientation. In order to welcome and celebrate increasingly fluid expressions of the sexes and genders that are assigned at birth, to safeguard the advancements of the Women’s Movement, as well as to champion further advancements for the Trans Movement, society as a whole must ease the stereotypical gender expectations that are attached to each of the sexes and acknowledge that they have been socially constructed. Similarly, they can be socially deconstructed.

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