

## Class 6

### Readings

Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, anthologized in *The Trans Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker.

Today we are going to be talking about trans issues, and we were warned that much of the text we were going to read today would be controversial.

### Trans Theory

We read from Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* written in 1979. She is considered to be one of the most influential authors on trans theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet her writing indicates that she possessed very negative ideas on transsexuality; many of her theories were very outlandish and unfounded. Certainly less was known about the issue in the 70's, but does that excuse making harmful and bigoted statements?

Some students in the class called her ideas "conspiracy theories" and compared them to the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#).

Raymond asserted that there was a plot by male to female (MTF) transsexuals and the medical establishment to make genetic women obsolete. She also felt like it was a way for men to inhabit women's space. Apparently Raymond hasn't moderated her position at all. She virtually ignored the idea of transmen (female to male transsexuals). She had ideas that transmen were sell-outs who couldn't hack it and just wanted a piece of patriarchy.

Many in the class accused Raymond of being transphobic. One student asserted that Raymond assumes that all transwomen, that all women have the same experience. There isn't one experience of what it's like to grow up as a woman.

### Brief history of trans movement

The instructor couldn't find an account of trans history that was complete and didn't omit anything. The 1960's and '70's really was the era that opposition to transpeople was firmed up. Before then transgender issues were looked at curiously but relatively accepted. One of the first gender surgeries was in the 1930's. The most high profile case was Christie Jorgenson in the 1950's. She got lots of media attention. At first, the response was very positive.

Things changed in the 1970's. This elicited a discussion of political lesbianism that became more popular during that time. Political lesbianism is the controversial idea that a woman chooses to be a lesbian as a way to undermine men's power.

People were initially allowed to change their gender on government documents, and in the 1960's that stopped being so easy. It was difficult to get surgeries or hormones. Now it varies greatly state by state. Most states won't recognize change unless a trans person has had surgery. And even then, what constitutes surgery is not well defined, especially

for transmen. Apparently there is an insurance company in California that covers trans surgeries. In Ohio a transperson can never have their birth certificate changed, no matter what surgery or hormones are obtained. There are only 3 states that explicitly protect trans rights.

### **Response to Raymond**

Sandy Stone responded to Raymond's piece, but it's equally problematic. She titled it *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*. She wrote that when a transperson passes, they make it impossible to have authentic relationships. Essentially, if you're passing, you're lying, and you can't be engaged with another person. She advocates that trans people should not try to pass. Passing is being "stealth." Transgender is an interesting minority, because its members are essentially invisible.

### **Transsexuality and Judith Butler**

Trans issues can be viewed through the lens of the work of Judith Butler. Because Butler comes from a theatre and acting background, it was natural for her to think of gender as a performance. She states that one is taught to perform something that is at odds with one's gender identity. She is not saying that gender identity is not of value.

If a person desires to inhabit a particular gender role, all that is stopping them is the ability to meet the codes and performance cues. One's body need not determine one's role. One's body can be part of the performance including surgical or hormonal interventions. Gender is a performance that has specific allotted roles in society. She believes that gender is a ritualized form of expression. By living in this system, we are reinforcing the system. In her model, biological/psychological gender is constructed, in the way that they relate to themselves or each other. Physical sex is not constructed, but once a person is in society, they are playing the part of a social construction.

This conversation led to a discussion about the way women's colleges are dealing with transgender issues. If a student was MTF upon applying, are they considered a woman? More problematic is when a student transitions to a man while in school. What to do then? Both Smith and Mount Holyoke have adopted gender neutral language in their documentation, referring to students instead of gender specific language. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's policy about only allowing biological women was also brought up.

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