A Spark of Transsexual Embodiment: Responses to Janice G. Raymond's The Transsexual Empire

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**Abstract**

Janice Raymond's book, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the Shemale*, has played an integral part in the creation of Western contemporary ideas of embodiment in the trans community. As one of the first non-medical texts published around issues of transsexuality, Raymond's negative and damning conception of the trans community reached broader audiences and was given greater validity due to her stance as a feminist leader. In reaction to Raymond's portrayal of transsexuals, a sense of community among trans individuals was fostered and thus bore contemporary notions of transsexuality embodiment.

Sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing was one of the first to research transsexuals within modern-day scientific medical framework. Krafft-Ebing wrote *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886, which contained case studies of patients who exhibited "characteristics of inverted sexuality," and who considered "themselves to belong to the opposite sex." Magnus Hirschfield, a German doctor, wrote *Die Transvestite* in 1910, and continued these first mentionings of what would later become known as transsexuality. Along with his publications, Hirschfield oversaw one of the first successful sex reassignment surgeries (SRS) performed in 1930. While many terms existed for the transsexual community in the early twentieth century, such as "transvestite" or "shemale," it was not until his 1950 article "Psychopathia Transexualis," that David Oliver Cauldwell coined the term "transsexual."

The works of Cauldwell, Hirschfield, and Krafft-Ebing were picked

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3 Hirschfeld, 28.
up and adapted by Dr. Harry Benjamin in the 1960s with his work *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. This book explored transsexuality in a modern context, and aided in the creation of the "Standards of Care," which are a set of regulations that individuals seeking SRS must adhere to. With the discourse surrounding transsexuality existing almost purely in the context of medical literature, prior to the mid-20th century non-medical literature did not really exist until 1963, when Christine Jorgensen published an autobiography detailing her transition from male to female; however, up until the 1960s, the literature that existed around transsexuality worked to pathologize and medicalize this particular segment of society.

Starting in the mid 1970s, there has been a growing discourse around the idea of social constructionism in relation to gender and transsexuality. It is from this social constructionist discourse that Janice G. Raymond constituted her arguments for *The Transsexual Empire*. Raymond's book, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, was the first non-medical text written by a feminist scholar on transgender issues. The book proves to be one of the most prominent books presenting constructionist views on transsexuality, effecting profound influence on the transsexual community within the contemporary feminist movement. While Raymond is not the only outspoken, self-proclaimed feminist who has written such works around issues of transsexuality, her published works are cited as the most influential in the conception of transwomen within the feminist community. While other pieces of work have been published surrounding feminist discourse and transsexuality, works by Bernice Hausman and Marjorie Garber, for example, have made less of an impact on scholarship than *The Transsexual Empire*. Raymond's work informs the transsexual community and non-transsexual community alike. While the primary focus of this paper will rest on the effect of Raymond's book, authors with similar viewpoints will also be discussed.

In *The Transsexual Empire*, Raymond critiques the origins, construction and embodiment of transsexuality, especially that of transwomen. In her edification of transwomen, she works to demonize them; for Raymond, the transsexual woman exists as a result of the medical community's desire to objectify, fetishize and infiltrate women's spaces and the feminist

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movement. Raymond's constructs the transwoman through a method that perpetuates sex-essentialist views of who has the right to be recognized as a woman and by extension who has the right to be considered feminist and who has a place within the movement.

The demonized construction of the transsexual woman informed a strong and vocal part of the feminist movement, who took its cue and knowledge base from Raymond. The publication of Raymond's book was at a crucial time when the issue of the inclusion of transwomen became a contentious debate within the feminist movement and community. In contrast to her extensive discussion on transsexual women, Raymond not only ignores transsexual men but also actively denounces their prominence. At a time when there was a surge of interest in trans-individuals, downplaying the existence of transsexual men helped to guide research and discourse away from this section of the community, and encouraged a one-sided understanding of transsexual issues.

The negative and one-sided portrayal of transsexuals throughout Raymond's book leads to the emergence of transsexuals as "part of the story, and mechanism, of patriarchal oppression." This portrayal in many ways contributes to the building tensions within the feminist movement when dealing with issues around transsexuality; however, these damning depictions of transsexuals also led to increased awareness around issues of transsexuality from the lived narratives and perspectives of transsexual persons. With an increased existence of transsexual narratives comes an increased visibility, which creates a greater sense of unity within the transsexual community—working to bolster the transsexual identity and foster a greater sense of a population within the transsexual community. Specific attention will be focused on two specific texts, one that was created in direct response to Raymond's book, "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Post Transsexual Manifesto" and a 1992 article titled "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come." In addition to these texts, the creation of the radical group, the "Transsexual Menace," and some of the changes the group has been garnered within the feminist movement and in legislation will be examined.

The feminist debate on transsexuals was one that began due to the strong need to identify an oppressor, which, in a second-wave feminist framework, was often men, or more accurately the aspect of a man, which denotes his difference from women—the phallus. In identifying an oppressor, some

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9 Stephen Whittle, "Where Did We Go Wrong? Feminism and Trans Theory—Two Teams on the Same Side?" in *The Transgender Studies Reader* ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 195.
10 Leslie Feinberg, "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come" in *The Transgender Studies Reader* ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge,
feminists felt the need to separate themselves from all things that could be viewed as phallus centric. This strain of feminism broke off to become known as lesbian separatism. One of the most prominent aspects of lesbian separatist feminism is the pseudo manifesto of "The Woman Identified Woman" written by the group Radicalesbians in 1970. The text defines woman as one who grew up and was socialized as such, she was someone who "cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself." In creating a space where the only women who were legitimated as those who had been socialized as women, the possibility of allowing transwomen access to this separatist space became a point of contention. The question became, how could a transwoman, who was socialized and raised as male, fit into a women's only space? With existing information around transwomen being almost purely medical, and the small number of published personal narratives focusing on the transition process - a journey to becoming the ultimate male stereotype of it what means to be a woman - a large portion of the lesbian separatist community succumbed to paranoia, a feeling of "penetration... [of] woman-only space by men."

In 1979, Janice Raymond became a champion of the lesbian separatist community's paranoia. As mentioned above, Raymond was not the only feminist who held similar views towards transsexuality. Bernice Hausman is one such theorist who felt that transsexuals were not were interested in signaling the end of the gender paradigm, but in fact were promoting this paradigm. Instead, Hausman argues that transsexuals actively work to reproduce gender stereotypes, as the gender paradigm allows for the transsexual category to exist. While some out-spoken feminists felt that transsexuals actually had a stake in the perpetuation of the gender binary, many worked to deny the transsexual community any agency over their actions, situating them as individuals who had an un-nuanced understanding of gender roles, and were unwittingly perpetuating gendered stereotypes. One such feminist was Marjorie Garber, who represented transsexuals as passive vessels. In her writings, she parrots medical discourses which positon transsexual individuals as lacking any agency and critical conscience around choices and embodied situation. In positioning transsexuals without agency over their physical bodies, these theories worked in similar ways to the system that feminists were attempting to deconstruct, the idea that transsexuals had an understanding

13 Hausman,.
of their actions and situations, was not something that these feminists could comprehend. The campaign “Our Bodies, Ourselves,” came from a book first published in 1973, which focused on women having the right to their own bodies and their own choices, specifically in relation to the reproductive system. This campaign, which worked to empower women in relation to their own bodies, can be viewed as hypocritical when seen in juxtaposition to the feminist community’s attempts to police the transsexual community. In reaction to the damning and passive position created by Raymond and Garber many transsexual feminists worked to have their voices counted and heard.

The transsexual community was continually discussed by medical and feminist communities in a manner, which denied their agency and placed them in a position of carrying out a more hegemonic ideal of patriarchy through the process of physical transition. Little attention was paid, however, to the past involvement they have had in actively fighting for their own rights. The first instance where the transsexual movement is said to have occurred is in 1966, at the Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco. The Compton Cafeteria Riots (as they have been dubbed), while pre-dating Stonewall, were given very little press and as such almost no documentation exists detailing the events and the outcomes of the night. What little information that has been found, concludes that, late in August in 1966, a group of drag queens and transwomen who frequented the Compton Cafeteria were physically confronted by police officers. Much like the Stonewall riots, this night proved to be a breaking point and a drag queen, who was being physically abused by a police officer, fought back. From here, the fifty or so patrons of Compton’s revolted against the abusive treatment of the cops and the fight made its way to the streets, where a riot of drag queens and trans people broke out. This event, which pre-dated much of the earliest feminist scholarship around transsexuality, works against the notion of the trans community as simply complacent. As Raymond argues, that the system of patriarchy that transsexual women work through becomes questionable when looking at the treatment of the trans community by those who work to police the society that patriarchy has helped build.

One transwoman, who was personally noted by Raymond in the The Transsexual Empire was Sandy Stone. In direct response to Raymond’s book Stone wrote, publish and presented “The “Empire” Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” a paper that explores gender from a post-structuralist view. Stone argues that gender and gender identity is not static, but is something that changes depending on particular contexts.

17 Stryker.
18 Stryker.
19 Raymond, 101.
In addition to calling for deconstruction of the gender paradigm, Stone actively encourages trans and "differently-gendered" individuals to come out and make themselves known. Through the defiant act of "coming out of the closet," she claims that the everyday lives of passing transsexuals become a site where gender is subverted. In addition to calling for a movement in which individuals overtly identify their gender identity, Stone explores past biographies of transsexuals and how they have been used to perpetuate a stereotypical, heterosexual account of a transition process that transwomen are expected to adhere to.

Many of the texts Stone explores, hold accounts of how these women feel "small and neat," and understand their sexuality and place in relation to men. One story recounts the feelings of a transwoman towards her male lover: "it was the first time her woman's heart had trembled before her lord and master before the man who had constituted herself her protector, and she understood why she then submitted so utterly to him and his will." In exploring the personal narratives of transsexuals, Stone wishes to encourage new forms of self-reflection. Ultimately, Stone wishes to create a new text upon which to build a newfound sense of empowerment for transsexuals regarding their own particular embodiment, instead of re-reading and re-iterating the same script that has continued to de-validate the lived experiences of many transsexuals.

Stone's positioning in writing this Manifesto was particularly poignant; she was a transwoman working at the women's only recording company Olivia Recordings. It was her position at Olivia which Raymond attacks, believing that the women at Olivia Records hired her because they did not want to be viewed as "man-hating" and were somehow being deceived by Stone.

Pre-dating Stone's work, a pamphlet entitled "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come" was written by trans activist Leslie Fienberg. While not in direct response to Raymond, the pamphlet calls upon transsexuals and "pangendered" individuals alike to speak out by creating a space and name which they can fight under. This movement was noted as the "Transgender Movement," which was kicked started by Feinberg's publication in 1992. In creating a new name for the transsexual movement, with a name that was more inclusive and stepped away from the overly medicalized identity of "transsexual," a

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21 Stone, 231.
22 Stone, 231.
23 Stone, 226.
24 Stone, 226.
26 Feinherg, 220.
27 Feinberg, 220.
new sense of community was fostered. As Feinberg notes, "it's hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us."\(^{28}\) By stepping away from its medicalized past, the newly dubbed "Transgender Movement" fights "gender-phobia"\(^{29}\) and for the construction of a new movement with an understanding that a sense of solidarity can only be successful with the consideration of how and why different forms of oppression exist and who will ultimately benefit from the pre-existing structures.\(^{30}\) As noted by Feinberg, these structures use "divide-and-conquer tactics,"\(^{31}\) which work in pitting different movements with a similar goal against each other and blinding those involved from being able to recognize their allies. It is through the bonds of solidarity, which can be forged by individuals and communities who strive to respect each other's differences, that liberation can be won. Feinberg points out that "the struggle against intolerable conditions is on the rise around the world, and the militant role of transgender women, men and youths in today's fight-back movement is already helping to shape the future."\(^{32}\)

While Stone wrote a manifesto, other transwomen found it more useful to actively band together in response to the backlash of the feminist movement. Riki Anne Wilchins started the "Transsexual Menace" in New York in 1993.\(^{33}\) The parodies play off of "The Lavender Menace," which was a group of lesbian women who organized and took over the NOW (National Organization of Women) Conference in 1969 to speak out against the rampant homophobia in the feminist movement.\(^{34}\) Wilchins recounts how the group became official in 1993: "a group of us looked at ourselves and said 'it's time to move beyond services and begin to challenge systemic gender oppression.'"\(^{35}\) In the creation of the "Transsexual Menace", the question of whether or not the transsexual community could find a place within the feminist movement became further complicated. Instead of enabling and upholding a gender binary, a large vocal part of the transsexual community was actively debunking gendered oppression.

To date, the "Transsexual Menace" has expanded its reach and has chapters in major cities including Toronto and San Francisco. In addition to its expansion, the group has been actively working on including issues of transgenderism and transsexuality in many areas. Some of the work they have done includes the creation of "Camp Trans," which started as a protest against the Michigan Women's Music Festival's (MWMF)

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28 Feinberg, 206.
29 Feinberg, 220.
30 Feinberg, 206.
31 Feinberg, 206.
32 Feinberg, 207.
33 Riki Anne Wilchins, interview by author, Cindy Martin, 1996
34 Martin.
35 Martin.
“women born women only” policy, as well as working to educate, and open dialogue around trans issues within a feminist framework. In addition to “Camp Trans,” the “Transsexual Menace” has been successful at introducing and passing a resolution within NOW that recognizes the rights and needs of transgendered and transsexual people. Since the resolution, NOW members in New Jersey have been able to work on trans issues and be considered to be “within policy.” At the legislative level, the “Transsexual Menace” has been successful at developing and deploying an amendment to the New York City’s Non-discrimination Statute, which prohibits discrimination in housing and employment based on gender expression and identity. Instead of lacking agency and critical analysis around their embodied situations, the organized mobilization by such a group demonstrates an understanding and recognition of the structures in Western society that strongly counters the construction of transsexuals present by Raymond and other authors noted here.

While a direct correlation between the start of the transgender/transsexual movement and the publication of Janice Raymond’s The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male cannot be overly supported, it is clear that The Transsexual Empire acted as a catalyst for an already burgeoning movement. Like many movements, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the beginning, as there is usually a complicated web of events and reasons, which lead to an eventual breaking point and thus the movement is recognized. The start of the transgender/transsexual movement, while being identified as starting with the Compton’s Rio, for the most part lay dormant until the early 1990s. The rejuvenation of the transgender/transsexual movement came about in reaction to the feminist scholarship written by non-trans individuals who spoke for and about the trans community, which denies them a sense of agency and a critical assessment of the world around them and their own situatedness.

While the transsexual/transgender movement has been taken on by the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Movement, now known as the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) Movement, there can be no gloss over the historical base of where and how the transgender movement began. To ignore the self-aware actions taken by trans individuals both pre- and post-Transsexual Empire would place the trans community in a similar light painted by Raymond and others like her. To ignore actions that have worked to dismantle the gender paradigm and the patriarchal structure of our society works to disempower transsexuals and transgender individuals who are working to have a nuanced understanding of the position from which a transgender or transsexual person embodies in the contexts of Western society.

36 Martin.
37 Martin.
Works Cited


Wilchins, Riki Anne. Interview by author Martin, Cindy, 1996.