Re-Envisioning Trans Experiences: Empowerment Through Silence and Strategic Use of Narratives, Identities, and Diagnoses

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Abstract
Two emerging areas of trans/gender studies are explored: the strategic deployment of narratives, identities, and diagnoses as a means to access medical transition, and complicated relationships to silence as possible modes of resistance. Drawing on contributions made through other fields of study (including communications theory, theories of decolonization, and queer theory, among others), potential areas of empowerment, resistance and response to dominant cultural forces are presented, and an effort is made to delve further into often-unexamined questions of identity claims, cultural negotiation, the concept of 'having a voice', and self-expression.

In the growing field of trans/gender studies, gender identity formation has been a longstanding point of interest and has been conceptualized in many different ways. First coming to terms with, and then declaring, association with identity categories has been argued to hold within it an ability to find empowerment and to build communities through those common identities. While identity claims may in fact facilitate such conclusions for certain people, possible complications and negativities of declaring one's identity and being 'out' are rarely considered in critical ways. This paper seeks to delve further and question the often-unquestioned usefulness of declaring associations with particular identities as well as the notion of 'community-building,' and presents some other potential areas of empowerment, resistance and response to dominant cultural forces. Some preliminary exploration in relation to trans studies has been done in two particular areas of interest that have not yet been thoroughly written about. These are: the strategic deployment of certain narratives, identities, and diagnoses in order to access hormones and surgeries, and complicated relationships to silence as resistance. In an attempt to bring together multi-faceted understandings of such complicated material, this paper draws heavily on contributions made through other areas of study, including, but not limited to,
communications theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, theories of decolonization, and queer theory. The intent in borrowing these theories to explore issues of transgenderism is by no means to divert the importance or contributions to their own fields, but rather to explore new potentials and new important applications for the ideas contained within.

**Identity Claims / Identification – Where does it all begin?**

While some suggest that identity provides a much needed vocabulary in terms of how we define our loyalties and commitments, others suggest that identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis. In this sense the crisis of identity occurs [...] when something we assume to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.

— Brian Heaphy

There is a long-standing historical investment in building up the binary concept of gender (i.e., ‘male’ in opposition to ‘female’) as being part of a stable and coherent model, from clothing trends to body hair maintenance, psychiatry to pediatrics, television programming to publication of written material. These systems of gender identification are so entrenched in the foundation of culture that the majority of individuals do not question the basis on which they are built. In fact, gender identity and expression are so taken for granted that they become completely unintelligible as an act of choice. However, one does not necessarily have to know or be conscious of what they are choosing in order to choose it, for the effect is still the same – whether conscious or not, there is either an aspect of compliance (and therefore support) or dissent (and therefore a challenge) to the systems in place. It is particularly easy to assent to the dominant ways of being, as those systems are developed in such a way that they necessitate an active alertness in order to recognize and counteract them. This alertness may come in the form of a conscious decision to question systems of authority, or it may begin through more subtle forms, where certain moments of aporia (self-contained contradiction or confusion) are flagged in the mind as being noteworthy to be revisited later.

In the experience afforded to most people, the distinction between ‘ascribed’ and ‘chosen’ identities is rarely articulated – roles which are ascribed are often taken for granted as the only ones in existence and it is relatively rare within dominant ideologies for those previously ‘flagged’ moments of aporia to come together to form a separate and distinct identity formation (i.e., a chosen identity). In fact, it is most often the case that once a contradictory identity formation is developed, one’s position

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within the dominant ideological framework is lost and replaced with a position somewhere on the periphery of society. This is not to say one is cast out entirely, but rather, one is afforded much less power and limited in access to vital social institutions (for example, employment, housing, and social networks). An ascribed binary outlook on gender would invest strongly in the narrative of a female as something along the lines of: ‘a woman is a woman is a woman is not a man;’ the narrative of a male as something along the lines of: ‘a man is a man is a man is not a woman.’ These self-contained restrictive and oppositional ideas of male and female add up to a seemingly coherent cultural framework of ‘gender,’ and in order to uphold the appearance of coherence those who step too far away from these constructions must be ostracized (e.g., through teasing, beatings, shunning, verbal abuse, etc.), as they serve to displace that coherence and threaten to expose the underlying instability of the archetype.

The violent backlash that is met by gender transgressors serves to expose the extent of both the threat and utility of such transgressions in promoting consciousness of gender systems, and suggests that there is in fact much room for growth in developing an awareness of how these systems function. By replacing the false ideas of coherence and stability around gender with doubt and uncertainty and promoting widespread gender identity crises — in other words, by treating all gender identities and expressions as fair game for examination, instead of only those who distinguish themselves as divergent — new pathways are opened up for challenging and disempowering the force of gender oppression.

**Strategic Deployment of Narratives, Identities and Diagnoses**

Here’s what I’m after: a surgically constructed male-appearing chest, no hormones, no first-name change, any pronouns (except ‘it’) are okay. [...] I’ve quickly learned that in order to obtain the medical intervention I am seeking, I need to prove my membership in the category ‘transsexual’—prove that I have GID [Gender Identity Disorder]—to the proper authorities. Unfortunately, stating my true objectives is not convincing them.

Dean Spade

The lives of trans people have long been mediated through health and medical establishments — that is to say, representations of trans people, imposed treatments of gender identity-related ‘illness,’ and individually-sought access to medical and surgical transitions have long been informed and guided by the sexologists who first presented case studies of ‘inverts’

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and members of a ‘third sex’ to psychotherapists and the broader literate population. This mediation has resulted in formal medical guidelines that strictly limit the scope of individuals who can qualify for hormone therapy and/or sex reassignment surgeries (SRS). Those who wish to gain access must ‘prove’ that they have Gender Identity Disorder (GID) and/or that they are a so-called ‘true transsexual’ (defined by answers to specific items on medical checklists) in order to be deemed worthy of medical intervention.

Because of these strict guidelines, there is an established practice of gender variant people strategically deploying these medically-approved narratives of transsexuality in order to access medical interventions (e.g., hormone and/or surgeries); many people learn what the main components of these narratives are and piece them together in such a way to assure medical practitioners that they indeed have ‘reason’ to alter their bodies. In “Mutilating Gender,” legal activist and gender theorist Dean Spade includes elements of his own personal experience in attempting to access low-cost SRS counseling in the US as a stepping stone for looking more broadly at the diagnosis and treatment of GID and other gender-related medical ‘disorders.’ Spade posits that it would appear “the creation of the subject position ‘transsexual’ by the medical establishment restricts individuals seeking body alteration and promotes the creation of norm-abiding gendered subjects.” Yet the barriers that are placed around accessing reconstructive surgeries for gender variant people, however rigid they appear to be, do come hand in hand with ways to get around them. For someone like Spade, whose gender is fluid and not defined as either strictly male or strictly female, getting approved for hormones and/or surgery can be near impossible — that is, unless strategically-constructed narratives are used when speaking to medical practitioners, where certain key indicators of being a ‘true transsexual’ are addressed when speaking to therapists, doctors, and surgeons. Barring changes in the current restrictions on accessing hormones and surgeries - the ideal situation - these strategic deployments of normative narratives may in fact be the best option for many gender variant people, and despite claims of dishonesty by opponents should be seen as a legitimate form of negotiating medical systems that only take into account binary understandings of gender identity.

Cultural Negotiation through Disidentification(s)

Disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of

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3 These checklists include questions about one’s childhood perceptions of self in relation to their gender and gendered expressions. The questions tend to revolve around which genders one associated with in childhood (‘same’ vs. ‘opposite’), which toys they preferred to play with, if they had any experiences of sexual assault or abuse, etc.

4 Spade, 316.

5 Spade, 316.
Jose Esteban Muñoz presents and explores the process of what he terms ‘disidentifying’ in his comprehensive work *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Grounded in pre-existing theories that have emerged through fields of gay and lesbian studies, film theory, and critical race theory, Muñoz conceptualizes ‘disidentification’ as a term that “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere.”

He looks at ways in which those who are outside of the mainstream culture (e.g., racially, sexually, creatively) negotiate the world in which they live. Instead of looking at ways of outright rejecting it, he theorizes a process of dis-identifying from general and/or popular conceptions of minority representation in mainstream culture through the re-appropriation of those images. To provide an example of this, Muñoz turns to playwright Marga Gomez and her work *Marga Gomez is Pretty, Witty and Gay*. A Cuban and Puerto Rican-American artist and lesbian comic, Gomez recounts in this one-woman show her first identification with lesbians in the public sphere. Being drawn down to the living room one day at age eleven, she encounters her mother watching a talk show interview with ‘lady homosexuals.’ She explains in her playful style:

[I] sat next to my mother on the sofa. I made sure to put that homophobic expression on my face. So my mother wouldn’t think I was mesmerized by the lady homosexuals and riveted to every word that fell from their lips. They were very depressed, very gloomy. You don’t get that blue unless you’ve broken up with Martina. There were three of them. All disguised in raincoats, dark glasses, wigs. It was the wigs that made me want to be one.

Even when a young Gomez is presented with a pathologized version of depressed, stereotypically ‘tragic’ lesbians, she identifies something in their existence that she finds relatable, and subsequently re-interprets the image to being one that is glamorous, intriguing, and sexy, dis-identifying it from its intended or expected role (i.e., invoking pity or disgust). Disidentification can occur in many different forms, though it generally involves this type of transformation of a seemingly negative image into something positive, glamorous, and relatable. As Muñoz phrases it, “spectacles such as those that Gomez presents offer the minoritarian

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7 Muñoz, 4.
8 Muñoz, 3.
Despite all of the positive potential found within this process, Muñoz acknowledges that it is important to recognize that “disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects,” and that “at times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere.”

However, the process of disidentification is generally seen to be empowering in that, for some, it is a survival strategy that works simultaneously within and outside of the established public sphere. Disidentifying is a way to resist cultural homogenization of minoritized people and to form and maintain an individual identity, a use that is directly relatable to trans folks, who are undoubtedly included in the category of minoritarian subjects.

When it comes to trans identity and experience, there are most certainly cultural expectations and/or stereotypical notions that follow suit. Jay Prosser in *Second Skins* writes, “in common perception, to name oneself transsexual is to own precisely to being gender displaced, to being a subject in transition, moving beyond or in between sexual difference.” This gender displacement often comes along with pressure to ‘fix’ it by living as ‘normal’ a life as possible; there is an expectation to cast away a ‘trans’ identity all together once hormones have been taken and surgeries have been had and identify solely as a man/masculine or as a woman/feminine. Other expectations of the personal histories of trans people include violent upbringings and unhappy childhood family life, early expression of desiring to be another gender, and other potentially pathological behaviours. In discussing transsexual autobiography past and present, Pat Califia positions a ‘first wave’ in the early writings of people like Christine Jorgensen and Jan Morris. Califia is careful to point out the language of Jorgensen and Morris’ autobiographies and notes that in contrast to the expected traumas of trans people, “Jorgensen and Jan Morris both described childhoods that were free from family violence, sex-role ‘confusion,’ or other behaviour that might be considered pathological.”

In countering the stereotypes by sharing personal experiences, both Jorgensen and Morris are in a sense disidentifying from “The Trans Identity” proper. They are negotiating their own place amongst all the partial truths and full-out lies that surround their experience and are creating space for their own survival strategies within trans narratives.

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9 Munoz, 1.
10 Munoz, 5.
11 Munoz, 5.
13 For more on the ‘first wave’ of trans autobiography, see Califia’s “Transsexual Autobiography: The First Wave” in *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*.
Self-Expression through Silence: Potentials for Resistance

Silence as refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less given to the silencers.

— Trinh Minh-ha

Silence in Western thought is frequently conceptualized as simply an absence of speech for some transitory period of time, however silence has been argued to be as meaningful and complex as written or spoken language—silence often consists of important pauses, breaks in narrative, and rejection of verbal articulation. In listening for these components and paying attention to where they fall, meaning can be drawn out in a complex and multilayered ways. Trinh Minh-ha in the quote above points to an important potential for silence—silence as resistance. Sometimes by remaining silent—by maintaining a position out of the spotlight, slightly on the periphery of communicative interactions—a lot of discreet power can be built up to more nuanced understandings and eventual action. As Trinh writes, sometimes choosing not to engage with certain ‘stories’ provides a means for hearing other aspects in productive ways, also inviting opportunities to see things in a broader context. It is important to note here that Trinh is conceptualizing silence in this context as an active choice, a “refusal” rather than a passive detachment or a happenstance occurrence. In this situation, she is decidedly not referring to contexts in which people are silenced by outside parties, nor is she referring to contexts in which individuals are, for whatever reason, prevented from finding a voice from which to speak.

The veritability of the belief that withholding one lone voice goes unnoticed and is therefore unproductive depends on the motivation and process behind remaining silent. On the one hand, in order to create widespread cultural change it is commonly believed that there must be some accompanying action. In this sense, if the goal is for action and response, Trinh is most likely correct in expressing there must be multiple silences of those who choose to engage in a “refusal to partake in the story.” On the other hand, for some people choosing silence as

15 Trinh Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989
16 For an in-depth examination of silence, see linguist Adam Jaworski’s The Power of Silence. In this extensive work, he argues for “the recognition of silence as a legitimate part of the communicative system comparable with speech” (p.12). In discussing communication, he emphasizes that whether someone is remaining meaningfully silent (as opposed to communicatively empty silences, which do also exist according to Jaworski) or whether they are speaking, the same interpretive processes apply, and as such, new ways of listening and interpreting must be developed.
17 Minh-ha.
resistance is not about igniting mass change, but is instead a way of negotiating for personal survival. Much like with disidentifications, this process may be a passive, natural, and unstructured occurrence or may be a conscious and calculated response. In this situation, the number of people involved becomes mostly trivial, as it is more about personally-meaningful ways of negotiating the world.

No matter the motivation or scope of silence, the refusal to speak is a refusal to employ language that is created and governed by the majoritarian members of dominant culture. Partial silence and selective silence — that is, refusal to engage with particular aspects of language but not others — can also be powerful means of resistance. Being intentional about word selection and usage rather than passive in its employment in itself shows a break in hegemonic linguistic patterns. This is a first step in changing the ways in which language functions and has been upheld to constrain certain individuals and identities. An example of selective silence is found within the refusal of trans people to accept labels or diagnoses that have been put upon them, often by non-trans or otherwise majoritarian culture, instead creating new words or utilizing existing ones in different contexts. In this case, it is not silence as the absence of speech altogether, but rather as specific segments of speech made absent in favour of differently-constructed ones. In this sense, this strategy functions as a twist on more traditional understandings of power-related silence — the parts of language that have been decidedly removed have been temporarily silenced, and therefore disempowered. For many trans people, the tension between speaking and negotiated silences is ever-present, particularly in negotiating relationships to medical transition, as well as in the narratives one chooses to present to doctors and psychiatrists and the choices that are kept private versus articulated around the alteration of bodies.

...And so? Thoughts for moving forward

It has by now been generally agreed upon that there are certain defined social expectations of what it means to be a ‘man’ or a ‘woman,’ and that those expectations are fairly restrictive in their deployment. However, with every person that dares step up against one of those gender boundaries — trans or not, verbally articulative or not — the stronghold of those expectations weakens ever so slightly. Instead of actively working to break down gender systems through oppositional strategies (e.g., contradicting essentialist understandings through being ‘out’ and showing gender as something that can be constructed), possibilities are opened for the expansion of coded gender expressions through living somewhere in the fuzzy spaces in between.

By resisting the repetition of self as ‘other’ — as something distinct and separate from the ‘norm’ — there is opportunity for dissemination of ideas through different avenues, and there is not only a possibility that there will
be less hostility towards trans and gender-queer people, but potentially also towards any sort of 'gender variance' (i.e., 'effeminacy' in men, 'masculinity' in women – whether physical, emotive, mannered, etc.).

In short, even through means of resistance that are not often considered as possibilities for empowerment in trans/gender studies, much room for exploration, challenging, and growth can be opened up as layers are peeled back and new ones appear. Perhaps what all of this adds up to is a complicated swirling of theory and identity, for the whole thing can be likened to a sort of identity dance. If one thing is for certain, there are many complex ways of conceptualizing and understanding identities and resistance, and therein lies the key to both challenging interactions between the two and developing new and exciting ideas.
Works Cited


