

REFLECTIONS

By Lorraine Grieves

How do drag, butch, femme, transgender, transsexual persons enter into the political field? They make us question what is real, and what "must" be, but they also show how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can be instituted.

(Butler, 2004, p.29).

For a significant stretch of time, my partner was an FTM trans person who had transitioned into maleness so successfully that it would be difficult to guess, upon first meeting him, that he was trans. Before dating him, I had had some experience dating genderqueer and trans folks, but never before had anyone that I dated 'passed' so well. I was in love and I was walking on new ground.

As much as I revelled in the celebration of this new relationship, it was accompanied by myriad challenges around my representation, visibility, identity, and belonging. I feared that homophobic relatives would do celebratory back flips when I introduced him because we could easily 'pass for straight'. Many times I grappled with creative ways to out myself (without outing him when he didn't want to be) and had to closely keep in touch with my gender and sexual politics. For him, the gender binary was important – it was maleness that he wanted to embody. As for me, being a gender transgressing, binary-questioning queer woman, I found myself at odds with my sexual identity and, in moments, feeling invisible. As much as I knew that our private relationship was extremely transgressive and very queer, this was not immediately obvious to others and it shook me up. Our conversations often got stuck when it came to my attempts to disturb dichotomous ideas about sex and gender. My theory did not fit with his lived experience and I had to come to terms with that. This fissure was and is difficult to describe. My partner and I were fortunate enough to find belonging in community with other gender-transgressors and 'box breakers', and through ongoing dialogue with supporters in our lives we worked through the challenges that arose. In the paper, 'The gender binary: Theory and lived experience', the authors write about accounts of

clients experiencing a loss within what was once 'their community', and work in therapy to connect couples with 'an appreciative audience'. I believe that this can be crucial and potentially relationship-saving work.

I first ran into the ideas in this paper when I sat in on David's and Julie's workshop in May 2005 at a Therapeutic Conversations conference in Vancouver. I found myself abuzz with anticipation and excitement; while many of the ideas were not new to me, having them presented at a conference for therapists was. Sitting in a room with familiar faces – community workers, therapists, some queer and trans community members – I realised that, in this setting, I had never before felt so invited to bring this part of myself and my experience to the table. Over the years, I have found allies in community workers and helpers who strive to deconstruct oppressive and marginalising ideas and practices; however, queer and transgender theory and lived experience has been a loud absence in our field. Ongoing discussion about gender diversity has been long overdue in teachings afforded to therapists and other helpers. True accountability to these ideas can only be found through willingness for space to be created for trans, genderqueer, queer, and other transgressive voices to be more present in therapeutic literature and teachings. If I have felt unseen and under-represented by my peer practitioners, I ask the difficult question: 'If this has been my experience, then what of our clients?'

The clients whose voices are reflected in this paper name a struggle to contend with the corporeal and social troubles that can arise when a partner is transitioning from FTM. As a queer woman, I have worked hard to be a supportive 'trans ally' to those in my community who have transitioned or are transitioning. I have witnessed the isolation and despair of my partner who found that members of his 'queer community', where he once belonged, questioned him harshly about his transition. When I needed support for my own struggles and concerns about my partner's transition, there were few places to go. Breaking this isolation and mediating guilt was tough for me as I puzzled through this shifting gender terrain and tried to push aside potentially immobilising fear around wanting to be a 'good ally'. A backdrop of discourse around trans-politics was present for me throughout my reading of this paper, as I thought about the heated conversations

that have arisen in my home community. Transphobia, ignorance, and philosophical debate have drawn some serious lines in the sand within the queer community in my hometown of Vancouver. This discourse can be tracked through queer dialogue and literature on a larger, more public scale. Patrick Califia echoes this noticing in *Sex changes* (2003) where he writes:

Transgendered political agendas have shifted in the last few years. In its original form, transgendered activism consisted of educating the medical and psychiatric profession, attempting to garner more support for administering the sex reassignment process. As more and more people went through sex reassignment and had a need for updated legal documents, that activism extended to lobbying public officials and the judicial system, to facilitate complete transition and the creation of new identities that were consistent with the transgendered person's gender ... Now, however, more and more transgendered people are saying that it is the binary gender system that is dysfunctional. Rather than pleading for treatment for a medical condition or a mental illness, gender dysphoria, they are asking the rest of society to change the way gender is defined and used in our lives ... There are fierce conflicts in the gender community. (p.209)

While there can be great liberation found in challenging the binary, this conflict can be seen in the lived experiences of couples who may hold two very different theoretical perspectives or be in community with loved ones with disparate theories about gender. Here may be another site of collision in that unhinging the binary can make room for invasive questioning about one's personal choice to have surgery or take 'T'. For partners of trans folks, this can make one's own struggles to come to terms with a partner's transition a topic that is rife with controversy. The unsolicited opinions of others and the soundtrack of a complex philosophical debate can be read as transphobic for some trans folks and their allies. At the conference presentation of this paper, a transman who had been asked to be a discussant in the workshop stood up and said, 'Don't forget, some of the guys need the binary, it's

what gives us access to surgery and other means of passing'. For therapists, the ideas presented in this paper present an invitation and an urging to remember that these various philosophical and political themes may be present in the communities of queer women and their transpartners and may be furthering of isolation and silence.

My personal work to interrogate the gender binary has positively influenced many of my relationships – with myself, with trans-identified persons in my community, and with my family. It has also enhanced my practice as a therapist in that I feel much more prepared to work with gender diverse clients in an ethical and accountable way. I hope that readers see this paper as an invitation to make sure that we are making space for gender diversity in our lives and in our workplaces. I have used these ideas to challenge some of the taken-for-granted notions that can isolate and silence transgender folks. For example, in various therapeutic worksites I have raised questions about paperwork that only leaves room for 'male' and 'female' gender identification. This and other simple starting points (like de-gendering bathrooms) can begin to unhinge the binary, and hence make room for experiences outside the dichotomy.

It is totally impossible for one paper to responsibly represent the matrix of queer/trans love and relationships, as well as unpack the gender binary, and I caution readers from utilising this or any other reading as a 'handbook' for work with queer or trans folks and their partners. My experience, and ongoing dialogue with many gender transgressors in my community, has led me to my own understanding and ability to deconstruct limiting ideas about gender. There is no one-size-fits-all way to approach this work – it requires a rigorous dedication to learning, listening, and to meeting people where they are with their gender identity and in their relationships. What this paper does provide is a suggested positioning and a method of inquiry and deconstruction to unglue the gender binary, an often taken-for-granted construct that we are born into and well trained up to participate in.

REFERENCES

- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
Califia, P. (2003). *Sex changes: Transgender politics*. San Francisco: Cleiss Press.