

Transgender Representations

By:

Ho Chi Sam

(B.Soc.Sci.[Hons], NUS)

Supervisor:

Dr Ingrid M. Hoofd

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Department of Communications and New Media
National University of Singapore
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Declaration

This thesis represents my own work and I have duly acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography the sources and information which I have consulted for the purpose of this study. The total word count for this thesis is 28207 words.

Ho Chi Sam

Acknowledgements

Hooray.

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Abstract

Transgender studies have long been blighted by social, political, moral, theoretical and methodological constraints, yielding a multitude of transgender representations in the field. As a result of theorisations informed by these constraints, transgender people have been respectively depicted as villains, victims and minions of patriarchal heterosexist binary orders. At the same time, they have been displaced from the very field of research named after them, as scholars have used transgender as a conduit for other theoretical pursuits that have no direct relation to the lived experiences and emancipation of transgender people.

This thesis examines selected contributions to the field of transgender theory, the underlying circumstances and constraints to their study and their implications on the lives of transgender people. Based on these considerations, it contextualises the assessment of transgender theories, arguments and theoretical proposals in Singapore and proposes a critical evaluation of the considerations that underline transgender representation.

This is a research conducted with a view to transgender liberation in Singapore.

1.0 Preface: The Myth

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes introduced to us the absurdist creation myth that bore relevance to "love" as the Greeks knew it. The idea of being in love and feeling "complete" or "whole" had its mystical roots in a time when odd creatures inhabited the land. These creatures in fact comprised two human bodies and had three sexes – male, female and androgynous. They had intended to ascend to the heavens and usurp the gods, but Zeus, the mightiest god, split the creatures into half, greatly minimising their threat. These creatures later became the men and women most of us are.

The mythological great prophet from Thebes, Tiresias, once stumbled upon two mating snakes on Mount Cyllene. He struck them with his stick and incurred the wrath of Hera, who punished him by transforming him into a woman. As a woman, Tiresias served as a priestess of Hera, and even got married and had children. Seven years into this punishment, Tiresias came across another two mating snakes and left them alone. It was an act of redemption that eventually freed him from his curse-cum-punishment and allowed him to regain his masculinity.

Handsome son of Hermes and Aphrodite, Hermaphroditus, grew restless having spent his childhood in the caves of Mount Ida. The fifteen year old went to Caria and was seduced by the nymph Salmacis, who resided in a pool. He subsequently rejected her advances. Having thought she was gone, he stripped and took a dip in the empty pool. Salmacis suddenly emerged from behind a tree near the pool, ambushing him with a tight hug and many kisses. In the midst of her

vigorous and lustful engagement, the nymph called out to the heavens that they should never be separated. The gods granted her wish and their bodies merged into one, becoming a body of two sexes. Hermaphroditus was later known for having both the attractive traits of the masculine and the feminine, and became a Greek symbol of bisexuality and effeminacy.

It is in Greek mythology and storytelling that we are provided with the theorisation of transgender and its various inceptions, accommodations and adaptations into the gender microcosmology. These are representations of what the Greeks believed to be transgender. They explain the origins of transgender and its position within the domains of humankind and the gods.

Aristophanes' tale suggests we are all derived from the same being and that we can be powerful when we are together – the very guiding principle of alliance-oriented movements in LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) rights advocacy. It reflects how people of different gender identities and sexual orientations today, if united, will possess the potential to challenge the authorities that have brought about and sustained their oppression.

The tale of Tiresias, in particular his transformation into a woman, speaks of gender change and loss of masculinity as punishment for his transgressions. Then believed to be supernatural but now seen by some as unnatural, gender change remains undesirable in a society that safeguards the boundaries of dimorphism, which in turn organise and circumscribe society itself.

The story of Hermaphroditus may appear to be a simple one depicting the combination of two sexes into one, explaining intersexuality. However, it reveals the construction of the intersexed (or hermaphroditism) as premised on the stable categories of “male” and “female”, thus understood through such a logic. It presents the transgender as a derivate of the enmeshment of male and female, bisexed and bigendered – a deviant or an aberration of an order comprising the basic building blocks of society, indissoluble, unchallenged and taken for granted.

Put alongside Aristophanes’ creation myth, Hermaphroditus’ tale completes a cycle of transgenderal – or the male/female dichotomy, whichever deserves privilege – creationism. All these tales allow us to understand how men, women and the differently-sexed and gendered are constructed and related to one another. They account for the cause and creation of the supernatural and the unnatural. They are ascribed with moral meanings, and impress upon us an ideal state of being. They are fact, science, religion and myth all rolled into one. These were few of the earlier representations of transgender.

With the multitude of academic disciplines in the Twentieth and into the Twenty-First Century, different representations of transgender are introduced and they come with different sets of implications and moral, political and theoretical demands...

2.0 Introduction: Re-Presenting Transgender

Janice Raymond once argued that transsexuals are functions of patriarchy, a poststructuralist view that provoked and challenged how we see the transgendered in relation to the world. Thirty years on, as a public advocate of the queer movement in Singapore, I find myself in a personal struggle with this view as I partake in the business of social change. Unfortunately, this would not help create more opportunities for or fairer treatment towards transgender people in Singapore. I have since embarked on this project to understand how transgender theory is derived; and in discovering key considerations and appreciating their academic contentions, I will assess their respective implications on how transgender people are view and treated and the extent to which they are given equal rights in Singapore.

The thesis title “Transgender Representations” is somewhat of a misnomer. The brief but tumultuous history of transgender theory is fraught with alleged misrepresentations and conflicting politics. Transgender theory is but a nebulous collage of discourses – overlapping, oppositional, provocative and subjective. A singular understanding of transgender theory is precisely an understanding of *a* representation of transgender. It then has to negotiate its place in a constellation of transgender narratives, theories and discourses, the respective trajectories of which are guided specifically morally and politically guided. As a result, transgender theory is characterised by the many contestations within it, each demanding how transgender is to be represented, and each demand is resultantly accompanied by a set of constraints and implications that affect the lives of transgender people.

This thesis seeks not to present *authentic* transgender voices, but addresses the various characteristics of misrepresentation at the level of theory. Transgender theory serves as a means to transgender representation. As such, more emphasis is placed on the identification of factors that lead to the trivialisation, omission and wrong(ful) portrayals of transgender according to various stakeholders, which in turn have implications on how they sustain transgender oppression.

While it is apt to consider this a thesis of transgender misrepresentations, I remain hopeful that with “Transgender Representations,” we would be able to identify key contributions and critical arguments in transgender theory, with a view to confront the impediments to transgender – and queer – liberation. This liberation has to be ultimately characterised by a mature society readily embracing the differently-gendered, with legislation of anti-discrimination laws extending to sexual orientation and gender identity, wherein any transgendered person will be not be conveniently subjected and exposed to feelings of fear, guilt and hatred towards transgender. This is a liberation from transphobia and its theoretical, social and political manifestations, and a move towards harmonious gender and sexual diversity, wherein no person is discriminated or persecuted for being who they want to be.

In view of this, I have identified three significant items in transgender (mis)representation, particularly in the field of research. These items exist more pertinently as limitations to transgender studies. First, the scholarly preoccupation with the radical theoretical potential of transgender studies has blighted the field. This is what I term the “Transgender Romanticisation.” The displacement and

decentralisation of the transgender subject is the result of this romanticisation of the transgender, as I will show how various scholars have used transgender as a conduit for pursuing other theoretical projects. At the same time, given theoretical, political and methodological preferences, scholars differentially confer and/or deny transgender agency, which has resulted in transgender people being portrayed as villains, minions and victims. On the advice of (the literature by) Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, Jacob Hale, Kate Bornstein, Jay Prosser and Viviane Namaste, among others, I will argue for a restoration of centrality of the transgender to transgender studies and theory. However, there exist constraints in theory of socio-cultural and political dimensions. I will discuss the relevance and limitations of their works and arguments, along with the works with which they disagree, in the context of Singapore.

It is not exactly inevitable, but I believe it to be paramount that the personal is the political and has to interfere and stake a claim in theory. There exist substantial homophobia and transphobia in Singapore. There are no explicit anti-discrimination laws protecting sexual minorities. Consensual gay sex is criminalised. Because of the continuing and unchallenged discrimination, in which they are neither treated fairly nor with respect, many transgender Singaporeans remain in a state of indignation. As a result, only a handful of LGBT activists are able to participate, albeit as constituting an inaudible queer voice in the heteronormative wilderness.

This is where I believe those unburdened by the markers warranting social, political and institutional discrimination, should make full use of their privileged

positions, and create platforms for dialogue and civic and civil spaces for the marginalised transgendered to participate. The cisgendered and heterosexually identified persons who aim to contribute to transgender theory also fight their very own misrepresentations, as they struggle to prove that the mythical moral majority – a product of populist discourse – is not necessarily ideologically homogeneous. This is why this thesis is written with a view to transgender liberation in Singapore. It critiques the histories, political and moral inclinations, and social and theoretical implications of various research and theories on transgender. At the same time, it identifies areas and arguments in transgender studies in need of critical consideration and adaptation for addressing transgender misrepresentation and its dangers.

Ever so often, we encounter the use of *transgender* to represent a collective characterised by its transgressions of culturally recognised binary and dimorphic gender. Virginia Prince inspired the use of *transgender*, and the term and its usage are in turn figured in a dichotomous relationship with *normal* binary gender. “Gender” has been a euphemism for dimorphic binarism, and *transgender* is, as it was originally used, everything “not-gender”. The later contributions of Ekins and King, Kessler and McKenna, Stryker, Cole and Cate, and other scholars studying the transgender have since allowed us to continually reimagine transgender and reposition it with respect to the institution of hegemonic gender, the organisation of the LGBT community and the realities of transgender oppression. There are however implications for various imaginations of transgender, as this thesis shall later explore.

Transgender may indicate transsexual (pre-operative, post-operative, non-operative), transvestites of varying degrees of fetish, cross-dresser, gender-bender, gender queer, genderfuck/er, drag kings and queens, major and minor transgressions of gender as it is specifically and culturally recognised, emerging cross-gendered behaviours and subcultures, and more, depending on how tightly or loosely different groups of stakeholders, transgender or not, would want to police its definition. Whether within the domain of LGBT politics or contentious heteronormative (or homonormative) cissexist transphobic discourses, within and outside transgender communities, there is always a high probability that *transgender* invokes the wholesome all-encompassing image of a transgender world, marked by one distinct set of shared experiences and values. There is however no transgender homogeneity and such a belief may prove detrimental as I shall show in this thesis. More importantly, I will argue for more attention to be paid to the contextual constraints that underpin the articulations of transgender identities, necessitating sociological inquiry.

A large part of the thesis delves into the literature contributing to transgender theory and the theoretical conflicts and tensions between different perspectives. I will explore the extent to which various bodies of knowledge across time and space have moulded – and troubled – our current understanding of and attitudes towards transgender. Given the availability of (mostly American) material discussing transgender theory and considering the nature of discourse analysis, I find it important to contextualise transgender theory by locating it in Singapore, the country of my birth and residence. Singapore is also home to people who identify as transgender or gender-queer, the very individuals and

communities whose rights various LGBT-advocacy groups and individuals, like myself, have sought to champion.

Transgender people often feel aggrieved that their identities and lives are “violated and misrepresented for the goals of scholarship.”¹ In my review of selected relevant literature, I will locate the displeasure various scholars have with one another, with respect to their theorisations of transgender. I believe with contextualisation, we will move towards a reconciliation of the lived realities of transgender personhood with their narratives and discourses in their respective socio-cultural and political milieu, to inform our theory of transgender. In the use of plural “discourses,” I recognise the extent to which transgender objects/subjects are constituted and/or intersected with various domains of knowledge. Yet, in theorising transgender people as subjects constituted in, for instance, dimorphic binarist discourse, we risk trivialising and omitting their attempts to negotiate and challenge the very discourse and structures of oppression. We also risk ignoring the potential sites for transgender empowerment and emancipation within these discourses. As such, I will argue for a greater focus and thorough investigation of transgender agency.

Given the diversity of transgender identities and articulations, no single approach is capable of teasing out the intricacies and complexities of transgender identity, embodiment and struggle for emancipation. This thesis sheds some light on the relevance of a hybridised approach, involving sociological inquiry and textual analysis, as a means to better transgender representation. I will discuss the

¹ Evan B. Towle & Lynn M. Morgan, “Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the use of the ‘Third Gender’ Concept.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.4 (2002): 469.

Singaporean examples of transwomen and transmen through this approach, showing for instance, how sociological and textual interrogations allow for the identification of the respective homophobic as well as gay/lesbian-centric cultural constraints transgender Singaporeans face as they articulate themselves. I will also explore how local groups and movements such as SgButterfly and Sisters in Solidarity are formed with a view to foster transgender solidarity and address transgender discrimination in Singapore, and also, the extents to which they are constrained and impeded in doing so.

In reviewing the literature and discussing the key components of transgender misrepresentation, I will explain the need to restore centrality to the transgender subject in transgender studies. Such a position has to remain sensitive to transgender lives, histories and the contexts from which they derive and are constrained by.

3.0 His/her-story: Transgender Theory

Transgender theory is not a single-disciplined, culturally isolated, temporally frozen, general concept. While it is formulated and used to represent specific transgender experiences, there exists a continuous discursive (re)negotiation and reconciliation between existing and emerging transgender phenomenon and theoretical conceptualisations. It is a heterogeneous collage of medicine, psychiatry, psychology, sexology, anthropology, gender studies, feminist theory, grounded theory, queer theory, poststructuralism, activism and only recently, autobiographies and theories by trans-identified persons. The sections in this chapter will show how each perspective and approach has provided a lens for which we see transgender, as well as their respective sets of limitations and implications.

A look at the history of transgender theory invokes a reference to Foucault's *Histoire de la Sexualite* and his critique of how institutions of authority have come to create a discourse in which subjects are constituted. The coming to prominence of transgender – transsexuality and transvestism in particular – was one circumscribed by the authorities of medicine, psychiatry and law. These were institutions which had also concurrently contributed to the relative invisibility of other forms and processes of transgenering. It was the prevailing discourse on transgender that was unable to fathom, accommodate and account for modes of transgenering other than the medically-sculpted categories of transsexuality and transvestism. Nevertheless the medico-psychiatric and legal establishments provided for what otherwise cannot be comprehensible outside society's dichotomous understanding of sex (and gender). Neither unambiguously male or

female, nor displaying the behavioural and emotional traits commonly associated with their physiology, the differently-gendered and sexed finally had a name.

Transsexuality, in this instance, emerged from the annals of the medico-psychiatric institution. Seeing how such pathologisation and medical modelling of transgender experiences are misrepresentative of transgender, social scientists and ethnographers have later sought other ways to provide a better study of transgender. They may share a similarity in empiricism with their medico-psychiatric counterparts, but their research begun with the denaturalising of gender and sexual deviance.

The denaturalisation of gender and sexual deviance has been a common sociological exercise for a while now. Scholars maximise the utility of cross-cultural studies and prove that gender across societies is culturally contingent. However, the denaturalisation project cannot fully account for the scholarship of (trans)gender, but in fact leads to the denial of transgender subjectivities across contexts as will be later explained. Like Foucault, we need to be able to incorporate a critique of power and knowledge, and embark on a project of politicisation. When relationships are involved, between peoples and/or between peoples and institutions, power is articulated as knowledge is created. We begin to recognise the creation, constitution, situation and situated-ness of subjects, and the nature and implications in which they are constituted.

The common observation and critique of the various transgender theorists later discussed is that transgender articulation is always, in some way or another,

subjected to constraints. There are political realities faced by theorists and transgendered persons alike that result in various representations of transgender, in turn bringing about alleged misrepresentations, transphobia, and other hindrances to transgender liberation.

In the following sections, I have selected the developments in transgender studies I feel have contributed to a theory of transgender and informed our knowledge of transgender.

3.1 Transgender as Medical Phenomenon

Transgender theory continues to develop and evolve as this thesis is being written. However, many scholars have made references to its medical scientific “roots”. In the fields of sexology, medicine and psychiatry, Magnus Hirschfeld, Havelock Ellis, Harry Benjamin and later John Money shaped and advanced medical and psychiatric knowledge on transgender, albeit with a greater focus on transsexualism. This could be attributed to the relatively greater visibility of transsexual patients, themselves ironically products of medical scientific advancement and technological innovation.

While it was through the German Hirschfeld we are introduced to the transsexual, there already existed an earlier body of literature on the differently-gendered, but mostly couched in the examination of homosexuality – a project that then dominated medical and moral discourses. In the latter half of the Victorian Era, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, another self-identified homosexual German, coined the term *urnings* to describe himself and others like him. He thought *urnings* to be the third sex, and saw same-sex sexual desire as tied to the desire to become the *other sex*.² He was also known to have brought homosexuality to the attention of the medical community,³ although the term *homosexuality* itself would be later coined by Austrian Karl-Maria Kertbeny for the purpose of sexual classification, in lieu of the existing *sodomite* and *pederast*, pejorative terms dripping with Judaeo-Christian moralisation.

² Vern L. Bulloch & Bonnie Bulloch, *Cross Dressing, Sex and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 204.

³ Patrick Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2003), 12.

Beyond establishing diagnoses and classifications, another German Richard von Krafft-Ebing examined the causes of sexual deviance, greatly influencing the medical scientific study on sexual deviance in that time. His subjects were criminals who were committed to mental institutions. Such sampling led to the conceptualisation of transvestites to be a compulsive thieves and obsessive masturbators.⁴ As a result, for Krafft-Ebing, any deviation from “reproductive, monogamous, male-dominant heterosexuality is described as criminally insane” and hence harmful to others and themselves.⁵

Briton Havelock Ellis was comparably compassionate to sexual variation, and like Hirschfeld and Ulrichs, was supportive of legal reformation to accommodate the gender and sexually variant. It should be noted that these three combined the efforts of scientific research and that of advocacy, an indication that they knew knowledge, as informed by science, research and theory, has its social and political implications. Rather than let others interpret the social impact and value of their work and ascribe moralistic slants to them, they took it upon themselves to simultaneously foster understanding and acceptance of homosexuality and the transgendered.

In 1910, Hirschfeld used the term “transvestite” to describe those who derive sexual pleasure in cross-dressing, and habitually wore clothes worn by the opposite sex.⁶ The term is used to describe someone who is a heterosexual fetishistic cross-dresser. In the same study, he rejected the collapse of gender and

⁴ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991 [1910]).

sexuality in the definition of transvestism. This distinction was illustrated in his identification of five types of cross-dressers. According to Richard Docter, Hirschfeld made an estimation that 35% of transvestites are homosexual, 35% heterosexual, 15% bisexual and the remaining 15% are either asexual or autonomosexual, a term describing those who derived sexual pleasure from their own bodies.⁷ This showed that the act of cross-dressing could not be associated with a single sexual orientation, suggesting a separation of transvestism from homosexuality. This challenged the common association of cross-dressing with homosexuality as many believed to be the want to mimic the other sex encompasses both aesthetic and (hetero)sexual taste.

Ray Blanchard, while acknowledging the usage of *transvestite* in a broad sense by earlier researchers, refers to it “in the contemporary clinical sense of recurrent and persistent cross-dressing that... is accompanied by genital excitement”⁸, suggesting a sexually fetishist base to the definition. *Transvestite*, for Ellis, placed too much emphasis on garments and he preferred the term *Eonism*, inspired by Eighteenth Century Chevalier Charles d’Eon de Beaumont, a nobleman, diplomat and spy of intriguing sexual ambiguity. *Eonism* also helped to explain *sexo-aesthetic inversion*, earlier coined by Ellis himself, which was associated with homosexuality. Ellis found the cross-dressers he studied to be equally empathising with the role of the opposite sex as they were about acquiring

⁷ Richard F. Docter, *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Toward a Theory of Cross-Gender Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), 40-43

⁸ Ray Blanchard, “The Classification of and Labeling of Nonhomosexual Gender Dysphorias.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 18:4 (1989): 315-334.

their apparel.⁹ The term *eonism* however did not catch on, as *transvestite* was increasingly used.

Hirschfeld created the term “transsexual” in 1923, which along with “transvestite”, signalled a radical departure from earlier medicalised connotations of the behaviour into homosexuality. Nevertheless, the transsexual continued to be discussed in the same medical vein as gender dysphoria, a diagnosis referring to the discontentment with one’s biological sex and desire to be regarded as a member of the opposite sex. It is thanks to Hirschfeld that we have a developed model of transsexualism and transvestism, distinct categories that would unfortunately remain severely limited in accounting for other modes of gender variance. Although having been couched in medical discourse for a few decades, transsexualism, along with Gender Identity Disorder, was only classified as a pathology in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 (DSM III). The International Classification of Diseases, ICD-10, classifies transsexualism within Gender Identity Disorder, and subsumes it under “disorders of adult personality and behaviour”.¹⁰ It appears that the medico-psychiatric establishment would assume the extraneous responsibility of gender/sex policing with its Midas touch of pathologisation. Transsexuality’s medicalisation and pathologisation are all the more legitimised with *cures* such as hormonal therapy and surgical intervention.

⁹ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 14.

¹⁰ World Health Organisation, *The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems Version 200, F64.0*.
<http://apps.who.int/classifications/apps/icd/icd10online/?gf60.htm+f64>

It is not surprising to learn of such paradigmatic leanings on biomedical determinism to explain social anomalies, characteristic of the epistemic community of the time of Hirschfeld. Such discourses continue to play a key role in shaping a theory of transgender today, without ever having the slightest of hints of the precariousness of the monolithic sexed order. That frivolous task would of course be banished into the hands of the less respected field of social sciences and humanities. It should be noted that field of medicine, in this case Western medical culture, is extensively informed by and steeped in the Judaeo-Christian norm of sex – one that is binary and logically oriented towards dimorphism and procreation. It is the reproduction of a particular cultural logic that emphasises the compulsoriness of binarism, and any transgression of gender would have invited substantial medical inquiry, after which cures would be conceived for a logical return to the equilibrium. The authorities of medicine and psychiatry played their roles well in enforcing and preserving this order.

Witten and others have argued that the idea of multiple genitalia or atypical genital is often problematic for this establishment.¹¹ Resultantly, intersexed children have been promptly sexed after birth – the gendered order inscribed upon the bodies of newborns – but not without social problems experienced at childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Such intersexed babies with minute penises had been reassigned to be female. All these *threats* to the binary order are systematically eliminated and thus repackaged, in this case, as medico-psychiatric entities or pathologies. Gender binarism and its insistence were hardly rocked, or questioned.

¹¹ Tarynn M. Witten and others. “Transgender and Transsexuality: A Brief Intellectual History of Transgender.” in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender: Men and Women in the World’s Cultures*, edited by Carol R. Ember & Melvin Ember (Springer, 2004), 216-229.

If Hirschfeld, one of if not the first to provide a systematic classification of gender identity disorders,¹² laid the foundations for the medical study of transsexuality and transvestism, Harry Benjamin would be the one to cement their place in medical science. Benjamin is a pioneer in sex reassignment and its set of ethical guidelines, standards of care and post-treatment.¹³ He made key distinctions between “transsexual” and “transvestite” in 1953¹⁴, and more comprehensively in 1966.¹⁵ Richard Docter summarises Benjamin’s observations¹⁶:

1. *The transsexual has experience a life-long gender dysphoria. He or she has felt cast into the “wrong body”.*
2. *This gender dysphoria is the keystone of a major disruption of identity development resulting in massive personal adjustment problems all due to the underlying sense of gender incongruity.*
3. *The “true” transsexual carries out an unrelenting campaigns to obtain sex reassignment assistance through various procedures, including hormonal and surgical interventions, and demands to live full-time in the opposite gender role.*
4. *Cross-dressing exists (with few exceptions) in practically all transsexuals, while transsexual desires are not evident in most transvestites.*
5. *All cross dressing – from mild transvestism through the most persistent transsexualism – was conceptualized as part of a specific spectrum of sex and gender disorientation.*
6. *The differences between transvestism and transsexualism were reflected in the balance among these variables as experienced by a given cross dresser: Transvestites are*

¹² Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sexual Pathology Vol 2* (Bonn: Marcus & Weber, 1918).

¹³ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966).

¹⁴ Harry Benjamin, “Transvestism and Transsexualism.” *International Journal of Sexology* 7 (1953): 12-14.

¹⁵ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*.

¹⁶ Docter, *Transvestites and Transsexuals*, 58-59.

fetishistic; the transsexual is not fetishistic. Transvestites are predominantly heterosexual in sex object choice; transsexuals may be autoerotic, passively homosexual, or, in high intensity cases they may strongly desire relations with a normal male while the transsexual is in the female sex role.

Harry Benjamin was one of the earlier doctors who believed that psychoanalysis was useless in understanding and treating transsexuals as he determined that transsexuality itself was not a mental disorder. He felt that it was a mere affliction that could be alleviated with the patient living in their preferred gender. As oestrogen and testosterone hormones were recently discovered, this allowed for bodily feminisation and masculinisation.

The medicalisation of gender dysphoria at that time appeared necessary for the distinguishing between the transsexual and transvestite. Here, the “wrong body” narrative figures at the heart of this medico-psychiatric discourse. With aid from medical science and technology, one could seek to align his/her body with his/her “correct” gender. The characteristics of sexual desire, fetish and identity are also theorised to be significant of the respective categories, an idea that would later be challenged by Sandy Stone, who criticises such a generalist profiling of transgender identities. There were exceptions to these theorisations as other researchers have also discovered that not all transvestites are fetishistic and some transsexuals have had histories of substantial sexual fetishism relating to cross dressing.¹⁷ These exceptions expose the shortcomings of the dysphoria diagnosis. Gender Identity Disorder has also been greatly criticised for the amount of effort

¹⁷ Neil Buhrich & Neil McConaghy, “Can Fetishism Occur in Transsexuals?” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 6 (1977): 223-236.

put into justifying it. This comes at the expense of attention and explanations focused on people's insistence on and the institutional enforcement of gender dimorphism.¹⁸

Another proponent of the pathologisation of transsexuality and transvestism was Charles W. Socarides who believed psychotherapy would address and respectively help transsexuals with their emotional dissonance¹⁹ and transvestites with their sexual perversion.²⁰ For the conservative Socarides, the behaviours "imitating" that of the opposite sex and those that present a "caricature of femininity" are symptoms of the emotional and mental disturbances of the transsexual.²¹ This approach to transgender belies the moral agenda of *experts* who seek to maintain heteronormality and binarism, and at the same time emphasising their naturalness and compulsoriness.

In 1974, psychoanalytic therapists Ethel Person and Lionel Ovesey conceptualised transsexualism as comprising two categories – primary transsexualism and secondary transsexualism.²² Primary transsexualism is characterised by a lifelong history of gender dysphoria, a history of cross-gender identity, and an absence of cross-dressing fetishism. Persons with this condition are usually convinced they are and should be a member of the opposite sex. As

¹⁸ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 82.

Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Charles W. Socarides, "The Desire for Sexual Transformation: A Psychiatric Evaluation of Transsexualism." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 125.10 (1969): 1419-1425.

²⁰ Charles W. Socarides, *The Preoedipal Origin and Psychoanalytic Therapy of Sexual Perversions* (Madison, CT.: International University Press, 1988).

²¹ Charles W. Socarides, *Beyond Sexual Freedom* (New York: Quadrangle, 1975), 131-134.

²² Ethel Person & Lionel Ovesey, "The Transsexual Syndrome in Males. I: Primary Transsexualism." *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 28 (1974a), 4-20.

Person & Ovesey, "The transsexual syndrome in males. II: Secondary Transsexualism." *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 28 (1974b):174-193.

with secondary transsexualism, primary transsexualism is also acknowledged to have distinct homosexual and heterosexual “types”. Secondary transsexualism is further divided into two patterns – the homosexual type and the transvestite type. These preceding patterns are considered primary, following which a change to transsexualism is labelled secondary. Docter provides a summary of these two types as organised in Table 1 below.²³

Table 1: The two types of secondary transsexualism

Secondary Transsexual (homosexual type)	Secondary Transsexual (transvestite type)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of predominantly homosexual erotic preference • Absence of lifelong gender dysphoria • Seeks sexual reassignment surgery following stress or major life change • Lives full-time in cross gender role, with or without sexual reassignment • No history of fetishistic cross dressing, but other cross dressing may have occurred • Strong features of narcissistic or borderline personality attributes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of some sexual arousal to cross dressing • Progressively stronger history of gender dysphoria which may be stress related • Less ego integration than in than in transvestites • Absence of lifelong gender dysphoria • Lies full time in cross-gender role, with or without sexual reassignment • Strong features of narcissistic or borderline personality

The transsexual taxonomy provided by Person and Ovesey presents a more diverse representation of transsexuals, one that is not bound by the frames of sexual fetish. New measures are created to account for the diagnosis and

²³ Richard F. Docter, *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Toward a Theory of Cross-Gender Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), 24-34.

identification of transsexuality, such as the degree of cross-dressing, fetishism, and self-perception. However, these were still couched in gender binarism as the “other” gender and sex would naturally be understood as the “opposite”, and that cross-dressing encompasses wearing the (stereo)typical clothes of the “opposite” sex. At the same time, both categories of transsexualism remained marked by psychiatry and psychology.

Biomedical science and psychiatry may have been separated thanks to the reconceptualisation of transsexualism in relation to sexual fetish, but they remain firmly entrenched in social stereotypes and gender norms. While this taxonomy expanded the encyclopaedia of transsexual identity, it nevertheless fails to account for many more transgender persons who display “symptoms” that present a gender orientation to more than just that of the “opposite”.

In the 1950s, psychologist John Money differentiated six levels to which *sex* may be understood, that proved to be helpful in understanding and examining the biological aspect of transsexing. They are chromosomal sex, anatomical/morphological sex, genital/gonadal sex, legal sex, endocrine/hormonal sex, and psychological sex.²⁴ As with the separation of sex and gender role by anthropologists, sociologists, sexologists and feminists before, during and after this period, Money stated that sex is something one is born with, although the sum of its six “parts” is a lot more complicated than the whole. In the midst of this

²⁴ John Money, “The Conceptual Neutering of Gender and the Criminalization of Sex.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 14.3 (1985): 279-290.
Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (New York: Columbia University, 1994), 6-8.

differentiation, Money also conceived of the terms “gender identity” and “gender roles” to account for the complexities of psychology and social behaviour.

The theorising of continuums of dysphoria/discordance and degrees of intensity of transsexual feelings however only legitimises the representation of transgender people in the terms of psychiatry and medicine. While the establishment of distinct categories have advanced research in these fields, it has resulted in lesser attention and considerations made towards those who fall in between and outside these categories. This would later provoke more attempts to discover and create labels and categories that would better capture any gender variance. The field of medicine was driven by one, the need to diagnose and taxonomise these individual conditions in a way understandable in a community organised by a cultural logic incapable of accommodating gender variance; two, the imperative to logically discover and scientifically explain the *origins* of transgenderism with respect to how gender is socially rationalised; and three, depending on whoever manoeuvres its moral and ethical rudder, the quest to find a means to return to *normalcy*, a state of gender and sex believed to be natural. Transgender people, mostly divided into two recognisable categories in transsexuals and transvestites, were observed as subjects of biology, genetics and medicine, rather than of society and economy, domains seemingly unfathomable by the medical experts of the day.

The constitution of the transgender subject here is by the discourse of biomedical science. As the major components of transsexuality are medically and pathologically defined, transsexuals remain vulnerable to being associated with illness and unnaturalness. This was very much the case in the pathologisation of

homosexuality, which lead to some conservative factions of society morally justifying reparative therapy to “straighten the queers”. Furthermore, the idea of homosexual pathologisation legitimises moralisation against homosexuality and the advocacy of reparative therapy. This explains, even in modern day Singapore, the presence of ex-gay ministries in Liberty League and Church of Our Saviour, despite the 1973 depathologisation of homosexuality by the American Psychological Association, an authority on medicine and health.

The articulation of the *science* of transgenderism/transsexualism is also ordered by the prevailing heteronormative discourse on sexuality. Such taxonomisation may be useful to professionals in the fields of psychology and psychiatry in *helping* or *treating* gender dysphoric individuals, and orientating them back into the gendered and sexed fabric of society. Outside these fields, the relevance of these taxonomies are questionable, and their impact contentious. Such categorisations do not account for transsexuals or cross-dressers who are either homosexual, identify as having a fluid sexual orientation or asexual. It is also taken for granted that sex change would restore heterosexuality to the transsexual, in that a transitioned person would have sexual preferences for a member of the opposite sex. Furthermore, the validity of such a diagnosis of homosexual fetishistic cross-dressing is questionable, for such a label is contingent on the categorical gender of the pre-transitioned person. This again supports the view that homosexuality would be cured with sex reassignment, maintaining the status quo of heteronormality, which drives the attitudes of the experts behind the diagnoses. Apart from straddling the categories of *normal* and

ill, the medical framing of transgenderism/transsexualism is further organised by the rigid dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual.

Attention is divided between addressing the aspects of transgender behaviour and homosexuality, with the latter often taking priority. This has reverberations in civil society today, when transgender persons in the queer community often feel an obligation to articulate their sexuality with respect to their transgendered or transsexed personhood. Transgender people have already long been confined to identifying themselves within the binary gender rubric, and risk further straight-jacketing into socio-politically established categories of sexual orientation. They find themselves entwined with the prevailing discourses on sexuality and sexual orientation, for example presenting narratives such as “I was formerly a lesbian” and “I used to be gay” ahead of accounts of their gendered struggle. These narratives of gender-sexuality identification and differentiation are also susceptible to misreadings, in particular that of the transgender renouncement of homosexuality. Such misreadings have legitimised homophobic movements today, supporting the particular moral discourses in which shame and guilt should naturally accompany the deviance of non-heterosexual orientation, and that the cures of hormonal therapy and surgery would allow for the restoration to the *natural* order.

The medicalisation and pathologisation of transgender are not without social implications. With diagnoses and concepts provided by these fields being the gatekeepers for surgery and administrative changes, it has been observed that transgender persons themselves knowingly and willingly embody and reproduce

the medical and pathological narratives, as a means to surgical and administrative sex change. Harry Benjamin wrote a book, the contents of which have been rearticulated by transsexual people seeking to legitimise their problem of gender/sex discomfort in terms recognisable by the medical establishment, and gain access to sex reassignment surgery. Seeing this as problematic, Virginia Prince,²⁵ Janice Raymond,²⁶ Sandy Stone²⁷ and Bernice Hausman²⁸ have respectively been concerned with the relationship between the emergence of medical technologies and the formation of the transsexual identity.

To this day, there are transsexuals who reproduce the medico-psychiatric narrative of being “in the wrong body” and “a man/woman trapped in a woman/man’s body”, an articulation of binary polarities that no less couple sex with gender (behaviour). There has also been a history of communicating one’s sexual preference to further justify the “wrong body” narrative, couching it in heteronormality. On top of that, there would be more accounts of one’s affinity with the toys, items, behaviours and aspirations stereotypically associated with the opposite sex as a means to justify sex change – a more hyper-feminised/masculinised rendition of pre-operative transsexual accounts in lieu of what they actually feel. Given the unilaterally proclaimed *laws* of biomedicine and psychiatry are highly respected and enshrined in the legal and social administration, we are confronted with two scenarios that ultimately further legitimise the medico-psychiatric slant on transgender: One, the conflation of gender confusion and the want to transition from one gender/sex pole to another

²⁵ Virginia Prince, *Understanding Cross Dressing* (Los Angeles: Chevelier, 1976).

²⁶ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*.

²⁷ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²⁸ Hausman, *Changing Sex*.

as the solution to this problem; and two, the predetermined articulation of transgender identity.

Gender confusion primarily stems from discomfort with one's body and gender role, and the experiencing of dissonance with socially inscribed and approved gender behavioural traits. For the champions of gender and sexual diversity and body confidence, this discomfort does not entirely equate to the desire to assume and embody the respective behavioural, physiological and psychological traits of the sex that is socially and legally declared to be the opposite of one's sex at birth. In this view, there appears to be only one other gendered position to occupy – one solution, one choice for the gender confused. It should also be noted that the notion of “gender confusion” – a “philistine misnomer” according to male-to-female transsexual Jan Morris²⁹ – is imposed by the medico-psychiatric institutions on those who actually know who they are and who they want to be.

The emergence of transsexual autobiographies in the 1960-70s introduced transsexuality to the mainstream. The publication of first-hand accounts of Christine Jorgensen³⁰, Jan Morris³¹ and female-to-male transsexual Mario Martino³² came on the back of forty years of the medical framing of transsexuality. Their accounts of substantial bodily discomfort – diagnosed and recognised as gender dysphoria – as well experiences prior to and after transition,

²⁹ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 30.

³⁰ Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (Paul S. Eriksson, 1967).

³¹ Jan Morris, *Conundrum: An Extraordinary Narrative of Transsexualism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1974).

³² Mario Martino, *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1977).

supported transsexuality's medicalisation and pathologisation. These legitimised biomedical science's influence on people's knowledge of transsexuality. This is probably explained by the presence of Harry Benjamin in the autobiographies of Jorgensen and Morris. These earlier autobiographies accounted for their conditions as medical anomalies and the "wrong body" argument was often put forward to explain their discomfort. Though these rationalisations were in line with the prevailing biomedical discourse, they served to explain the struggles of transsexuals to the general binary-savvy public.

These autobiographies, void of theoretical frameworks and academic arguments, blazed the trail for the differentiation of transsexuality from transvestism and homosexuality. Equally as important, there were acknowledgements of the transsexuals' previous sex and gender amidst descriptions of dissonance, dissatisfaction and discomfort. Jan Morris, following her transition, began evaluating the differential treatment she had as a man and as a woman. These provided the necessary social commentary to foster greater understanding of the gendered ways of society, all the more conducive in a political climate of sexual liberation (in the late 1960s to mid 1970s).

The visibility of successfully transitioned persons came at the expense of that of the gender variant, the non-operative transsexuals and the queer. These autobiographic accounts remained couched in heteronormative gender binarism, with accounts of heterosexual monogamy, guilty rejections of homosexuality and the respective connotations of masculinity and femininity into the male and female sexes. All the more these accounts do support the view that the *problem* of

gender-sex-sexuality incongruity can be and should be fixed. They fit snugly in a space and time when portrayals of sexually-queer gender-queer accounts would have otherwise been deemed too subversive and radical. Until the 1990s came, these queer accounts had received little-to-no exposure.

Today, transgender narratives of assimilation in dimorphic binarism run the risk of being charged as essentialist and conservative. They have been seen as eager participants of gender ordering.³³ It does not help that medical norms dictate that if discomfort with one's sex and gender is seen as *wrong*, the (only) choice of being in the opposite – and only – sex would rectify it. Given the lack of acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in the medico-psychiatric and legal establishments, no other choice is afforded to the gender “confused”. Transsexuals face a double jeopardy of being criticised for not challenging the boundaries of gender as part of the fulfilment of their radical potential, and also facing the reality of being straight-jacketed in the gender rubric at the expense of being who they truly feel they are.

Transsexuals, cross-dressers and other transgenderists appeared to belong to these biomedical and psychiatric domains, as a result legitimising the narratives of illness while drawing attention away from the social and political conditions from which transgender people and their narratives derived. Latter criticisms of biomedical and psychiatric representations of transgender would bring more attention to the social and historical conditions that underpin their study. This is where researchers in the field of sociology (such as Garfinkel, Ekins and King,

³³ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, 141-174.

Kessler and McKenna) and poststructuralism (such as Raymond, Stone, Stryker, Namaste, and Prosser) would make their contribution.

3.2 Anthro-apology – Transgender as Social Phenomenon

Prior to Foucault's restoration of historicity to the study of sexuality, the field of anthropology had reported gender practices revealing a non-correspondence of sex and gender. These analyses suggested that sex and gender could be distinguished.³⁴ The descriptions of transgender natives have nevertheless been distilled into terms acceptable by Western norms and standards. At the same time, in the urban and suburban areas of the same civilisation that spawned them, there are ethnographers who attempt to tell a story from the perspective of their subjects, thought to be authentic agents of their own destiny. In the case of the study of gender cultures, researchers situate the institutions of biomedicine and psychiatry in the social. They study the social relations within and between peoples and institutions, and how these relations constitute the sexing and gendering of subjects.

Concurrent with the development of a biomedical model of transgender, the field of anthropology was growing with studies of cultures which are not organised by gender binarism, a model for contemporary Western society. Researchers quietly struggle with their hegemonic gender socialisations and heteronormative predispositions as they seek to provide accurate and objective descriptions of these societies. The use of concepts such as "third gender", a term coined by anthropologists Martin and Voorhies,³⁵ has highlighted the extent to which researchers attempt to account for non-conformity within gender binarism –

³⁴ Evan B. Towle & Lynn M. Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the use of the 'Third Gender' Concept." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8.4 (2002), 471.

³⁵ M. Kay Martin & Barbara Voorhies, *Female of the Species* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 23.

a limitation in that gender binarism remains an uncontested basis for comparison with and conceptualisation of the “third gender”.

Gender binarism here is the innocent, untouched and neutral model for which ethnographic and anthropological descriptions and comparisons are made, and all the more justified as they are conveyed to those who adhere to the same order. With these cross-cultural studies of gender non-conformity and bending, cultural diversity is placed at the heart of studies on gender, revealing how gender as we understand it is culturally situated. Nevertheless, as Towle and Morgan point out, while the “third gender” typology provides an understanding and visibility of transgender and transsexual people, most observations of gender non-binarism and variance across cultures have been uncritically annotated under the “third gender” rubric.³⁶ At the same time, the category and discourse of the “third gender” while leaving unchallenged the hegemony of binary gender, remains a dumping ground for differently-gendered, accepting any other type of gender identity orphaned by binarism.

Marjorie Garber feels otherwise, and believes that the concept of “third” is useful for both the accommodation of gender and sexual fluidity, and the critique of binarism.³⁷ Carolyn Epple further highlights the importance of ethnography in the uncovering of multiple genders, particularly its emancipatory potential in disrupting the boundaries of binarism. However, Epple also argues that the conception of “alternative genders” leaves undisrupted the categories and

³⁶ Towle & Morgan, *Romancing the Transgender Native*, 472-474.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 475.

Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 71.

meanings of “man” and “woman”, charging that theorists of “third” and “alternative genders” undermine their own efforts.³⁸

The critique of studies of cultures that are alternatively gendered reveals great limitations in the fields of anthropology and ethnography. The Euro-American centric logic of masculine/feminine, man/woman, gay/lesbian/bisexual largely presents the transgendered natives in ways understood by Western communities. This sort of presentation has been criticised as observations are made using the prevailing normative gendered logic as a base.³⁹ Instead of providing new perspectives and interrogations into the adherence to and insistence on binarism, studies of “alternatively gendered” cultures are organised and presented in accordance to the rubric of binarism. The reliance on the Western cultural logic to read, explain and articulate the identities of non-Western transgender natives is also tantamount to colonisation.

With regards to even the loose use of “transgender” to describe gender identity in non-Western cultures, David Valentine emphasises caution and argues that “transgender” and its concept arose in the United States out of the recent cultural politics of sexuality, and as a reaction to gay and lesbian-centred politics of advocacy.⁴⁰ Terms of a particular history and politics have found their way into the descriptions of peoples and phenomena in other milieus. For example,

³⁸ Carolyn Epple, “Coming to Terms with Navajo “Nádleeh’’: A Critique of Berdache, ‘Gay’, ‘Alternative Gender,’ and ‘Two-Spirit,’” *American Ethnologist* 25.2 (1998), 273.

³⁹ Viviane Ki Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 29.

⁴⁰ David Valentine, “*I Know What I am*”: *The Category ‘Transgender’ in the Construction of Contemporary U.S. American Conception of Gender and Sexuality* (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 2000).

researchers such as Walter Williams⁴¹ and Will Roscoe⁴² have insisted on the use of “gay” to best describe the Native American *berdache*, underlying the strong emphasis on same-sex sexual practices at the expense of scrutinising their occupation and religious roles.⁴³ They risk misrepresenting their subjects with categories and labels each laden with its unique history and politics. With the portrayal of the *berdache* as “gay men”, it indicated an alignment of ethnographic research with the LGBT discourse of the time, in particular Western male homosexuality.⁴⁴ The academic pigeonholing of the *berdache* as “gay men” not only bleeds two distinct categories of homosexuality and gender variance, but also erases the transgender, omitting the intricacies of gender identity and sexuality.

On the flipside, the *bantut*, *hijira*, *tranvesti*, *berdache*, *kathoey*, *waria*, and others, would otherwise be rendered invisible without their Eurocentric depictions. The descriptions of the “transgender natives” in their socio-cultural environments also signalled a departure from the biomedical framing of transgender identities – a move from transgender as a medical phenomenon to a social phenomenon. Later sociological approaches to transgender, aside from being socially deterministic in nature, often hint at the arbitrariness of gender role and the relativity of culture across space and time. This later inspired a rethinking of gender and its construction.

⁴¹ Walter Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

⁴² Will Roscoe, “The Zuni Man-Woman.” *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* 2 (1988): 56-67.

⁴³ Epple, *Coming to Terms with Navajo “Nádleehí.”* 269-270.

⁴⁴ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 125.

In 1967, Harold Garfinkel was one of the earlier contributors to the field of sociology in the study of transgender.⁴⁵ In his oft-cited study of the male-to-female transsexual Agnes, he notes how gender could be managed through the embodiment and display of social cues attributed to the respective genders, and not merely through physiological changes. In exploring the social dimension of gender, Garfinkel sees gender as a “managed achievement”, or in Kessler and McKenna’s rendition, a “social accomplishment” rather than a reflection of biological reality.⁴⁶ Behavioural traits and cues can be calibrated in a way they correspond with the societal rationalisation of gender, which in constitutes an order that both informs and is largely preserved by the medical institution.⁴⁷ This also entails, in Agnes’ case, consultation with medical experts, who feel that the process of feminisation should be topped with the creation of a vagina. For Garfinkel, both patient and doctor share the same idea of what constituted “woman” and collaborate to produce it.

The anthropological and ethnographical approaches to studying transgender are not without their biases. For instance, Leon Pettiway may have provided a seemingly objective study of African-American transgender and transsexual prostitutes, but not without moralisation as he introduces his subjects as “addicted to drugs and commit sex work”.⁴⁸ He has been since criticised for being aligned with the prevalent American moralistic discourse against drugs and

⁴⁵ Harold Garfinkel, “Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an ‘Intersexed’ Person.” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 58-93.

⁴⁶ Suzanne Kessler & Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*. (New York: John Wiley and sons, 1978).

⁴⁷ Suzanne Kessler, “The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Inter-Sexed Infants.” *Signs* 16.1 (1990): 3-26.

⁴⁸ Leon Pettiway, *Honey, Honey, Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay, and on the Street* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

prostitution.⁴⁹ Furthermore, researchers like Pettiway are susceptible to ignoring the social conditions that underpin their subjects' inhabiting the fields of observation and compel them to make the decisions and lead the lives they do. Various social, economic and political realities experienced by different communities and demographics lead to professional and geographical displacement, which skews research and observation if not carefully assessed. At the same time, there are methodological and sampling limitations when researchers experience the difficulty of access to transgender subjects. As a result, prisons, red light districts, clinics and hospitals have become convenient sites for research.

Social research had also been greatly limited by the lack of accurate terms to describe the differently-gendered subjects across cultures. Up till the 1960s, scholars had to contend with medico-psychiatrically defined terms such as *transvestite* and *transsexual*. Virginia Prince first coined the term "transgenderal" in the magazine *Transvestia* in late 1969.⁵⁰ But the term did not catch on.⁵¹ Instead, by 1978, Prince started using "transgenderist", one of three classes – that also include transvestites and transsexuals – describing transgender people.⁵² As male-bodied person who adopts "the exterior manifestations of the opposite sex... without any surgical interventions", Prince identifies herself as a transgenderist.⁵³ It was observed an alternative usage of "transgenderist" shortly appeared after Prince's profound conceptualisation, manifested in the mainstream usage of the

⁴⁹ Viviane Ki Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 29.

⁵⁰ Virginia Prince, "Changes of Sex or Gender." *Transvestia* 10, no. 60 (1969): 53-65. Prince, V. "Changes of Sex or Gender." *Transvestia* 10, no. 60 (1969): 53-65.

⁵¹ Richard Ekins & Dave King, *The Transgender Phenomenon* (Sage Publications, 2006), 13.

⁵² Virginia Prince, "The 'Transcendents' or 'Trans' People." *Transvestia* 16, no. 95 (1978): 81-92.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 86.

term to encompass transvestites and transsexuals.⁵⁴ It should be noted that “transgenderist” then implied movement, temporary or permanent within the gender binary, vis-à-vis the modern day “transgender” which represents a larger constellation of gender-bending, gender-breaking, queer-as-fuck identities, all characterised by their movement within and beyond binarism, as well as their intersections with sexuality.

The study of the social dimensions and constitution of transgender challenges the study of transgender as a medical phenomenon. In studying the social, Anne Bolin is suspicious of the unvarying nature of medico-psychiatric category of transsexualism and transvestism, two distinct groups of gender variance only recognised by the institutions.⁵⁵ The psychiatric discourses assumed that transsexuals identified mostly as heterosexual, a portrayal Bolin disagreed with and argued against. Bolin observes a diversity of gender identities that challenged this transgender binary model of transsexual/transvestite. These are gender-variant people that neither inhabit nor display characteristics categorically associated with the medico-psychiatric classifications of transsexualism and transvestism. In her field work, she notes an increasing social acceptance of non-surgical intervention for those whose gender identity fall outside what is commonly ascribed to their birth sex.⁵⁶

Bolin situates her observations in their socio-cultural and historical contexts and believes the recent emergence of the “transgenderist” identity – that

⁵⁴ Ekins & King, *The Transgender Phenomenon*, 14.

⁵⁵ Anne Bolin, *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* (South Hadley: Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1998).

⁵⁶ These transgender people are also known as non-operative transsexuals.

roams the murky unknowns outside the medico-psychiatric cosmology of transsexualism and transvestism – can be attributed to the following factors: “the closing of university-affiliated gender clinics (in the United States), the grassroots organisational adoption of a political agenda, and social alternatives to embodiments of femininity as somatic frailty.”⁵⁷ This identity was formed from a combination of social and political circumstances, but would later be adapted to encompass almost every uncategorisable behaviour and identity outside dimorphic binarism.

⁵⁷ Bolin, *In Search of Eve*, 48-68.

3.3 Conceptualisations of Transgender

The anthropological and ethnographic studies of gender dovetailed with the emerging feminist thought in the mid-to-later part of the Twentieth Century not only to present gender as culturally contingent or an object of social construction, but also served to denaturalise the notion of gender as commonly known, and critique the articulation of power as gender is enacted on a daily basis. The framing of transgender remains nevertheless underpinned by the compulsion of gender.

Binary gender and the respective cultural meanings that have been ascribed onto biological, physical and aesthetic traits, continue to be the markers determining what constitutes transgression or transgending, hence the emergence of “transgender”. The denaturalisation project, however, does not put in place a framework for conceptualising and understanding non-binary gender. Long established and previously thought to be acultural and ahistorical categories of binary gender may appear to be challenged by the project, but they remain integral to defining transgender, with limitations. For instance, the carving of “third gender” spaces outside binary gender depends on the Derridean recognition of the *insides* – or constituents – of binary gender.⁵⁸ Binary gender is on the one hand, challenged and rendered arbitrary in the presence of transgender, but on the other, legitimised and quietly recognised as an anchor-point for conceptualisations of transgender. The descriptions and depictions of transgender travel through the frames of binarism, while challenging binarism itself.

⁵⁸ Namaste, *Invisible Lives*, 19-21.

With respect to their studies on transgender, gender theorists such as Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna often entertain the thought and possibility of a theoretical and practical elimination of binary gender through the conceptualisation of transgender. In contrast to academic developments in the 1970s in which gender was then understood as socially defined and culturally varied, they see transgender as a theoretical challenge to the social construction of gender, that such possibilities to be arisen from this challenge are limitless. In studying the (trans)gendered subterranean, these researchers also reflect on the social order of their own environments, a practice now a scholarship staple.

Indulging in some creativity with the prefix, Kessler and McKenna conceptualised the “trans” in “transgender” as change (as in *transform*), across (as in *transcontinental*), and beyond or through (as in *transcutaneous*).⁵⁹ These account for the different kinds of movements through the categories of gender and sex, physiological and aesthetic, behaviour and mindset, temporarily and permanently. Apart from continuing the denaturalisation project, I believe Kessler and McKenna’s study is oriented towards elevating transgender to lofty theoretical heights in order to fulfil its great radical potential. On the back of empirical data including ethnographic observation, interviews and collation of oral and written accounts, Kessler and McKenna’s (and also Ekins and King’s) visibilisation of transgender appears oriented towards challenging the boundaries of gender binarism. I shall later address the issue of transgender studies being used as a vessel for a politics geared towards dismantling gender binarism, at the expense of actually transgender subjects.

⁵⁹ Suzanne Kessler & Wendy McKenna, “Who put the ‘Trans’ in Transgender? Gender Theory and Everyday Life.” *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 4.3 (2000), <http://www.symposion.com/ijt/gilbert/kessler.htm>

Richard Ekins and Dave King employ a different approach in grounded theory to provide not only what appears to be an objective, but also a comprehensive study of transgender. With data gathered from mostly urban Western contexts, they conceptualise transgender as a social phenomenon, consisting a multitude of transgenering processes. They name these modes and processes “transgenering”, vis-à-vis gendering, believing it is “useful to think of gender not as something which people have, but to see the production of a gendered social identity as an on-going accomplishment; something which is constantly being done,” which explains the continuous suffix *-ing*. Gendering thus refers to the “processes whereby a person is constituted as gendered on an everyday basis”. Cultures which recognise only two genders see two processes of gendering – maling and femaling. Such a culture of gender would normally expect a correspondence of biology and behaviour. Ekins and King favour the term transgenering to represent the contravention of this rule when a male ‘females’ or when a female ‘males’.⁶⁰

With gendering and transgenering derived from this binary model, Ekins and King propose four modes of transgenering. Their grounded theory approach, comprising in-depth interviews over three decades, confirms that the various processes of transgenering occur within and between these four modes.⁶¹ They rename these transgenering modes as stories – stories of migrating, oscillating, negating and transcending. In each mode of transgenering, all the five processes of erasing, substituting, concealing, implying and redefining are said to present and varyingly overlapping. Among these five processes, one would be most

⁶⁰ Ekins & King, *The Transgender Phenomenon*, 33.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 34

dominant and definitive of the mode of transgenering. They are captured in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Modes of Transgenering

Story	Erasing	Substituting	Concealing	Implying	Redefining
Migrating	Present	Dominant	Present	Present	Present
Oscillating	Present	Present	Present	Dominant	Present
Negating	Dominant	Present	Present	Present	Present
Transcending	Present	Present	Present	Present	Dominant

Ekins and King's taxonomisation of transgender accounts for most processes of transgenering, including transsexing. Each mode of transgenering accounts for how one's gender identity is managed and defined. In the mode of migrating, one's gender and sex is most noticeably substituted for that of the opposite (e.g. a male-bodied person having a penectomy, breast implants and vaginoplasty). This mode could also involve, in varying degrees, one, the erasure of the identity markers of sex (via hormonal and surgical intervention) and gender (via clothes and behaviour); two, the concealment of one's sex, gender and past as a means to *pass*; three, the implication of one's sex and gender identity (via clothes and behaviour); and four, the redefining of one's identity with respect to his/her original physiology. Most post-operative transsexuals who live permanently in one gender (i.e. living as a man or woman) would tell a story of migration.

Stories of oscillation would be told mainly by different varieties of cross-dressers, who temporarily occupy *other* gender categories. Stories of negation are, according to Ekins and King, more difficult to detect, but best describe the process

of “un-gendering” which precedes gender migration.⁶² These are the stories that trouble binary gender as subjects nullify their masculinity/femininity and maleness/femaleness. Persons who are androgynous, pre- or non-operative transsexuals, and those who adopt and embody an ambiguous and indistinguishable collage of mix-gender/sex markers, present examples of “ungendering”, whether temporarily or permanently. The story of negation also overlaps the story of transcending as “ungendering” is present. The story of transcending slightly differs as it characteristically involves the redefinition of gender, or “re-gendering”. Ekins and King single out Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw* as a prime example of the story of transcending. These are stories of people who identify with and embody new sets of behaviours, roles, attitudes and aesthetics, which otherwise do not find any place within the binary gender divide. They not only occur as narratives, but also in performance, theory and politics, with a view to address and resist “gender oppression”.⁶³

Bernice Hausman critiques Ekins and King’s work, pointing out that the concepts of “maling” and “femaling” are premised on established categories of sex, gender and sexuality. Hausman believes such grounded theory and sociological work should be “steeped in a critical cultural perspective”, and that the structure of transgendering should be understood “through a critical lens that uses (these) categories to raise questions about social structures and identities.” In short, she was less than convinced their grounded theory approach to transgender could be used, if at all, for social critique.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Ekins and King should be noted for their contributions to a sociology of transgender. While they may

⁶² Ibid., 142-180.

⁶³ Ibid., 181-184.

⁶⁴ Bernice Hausman, “Recent Transgender Theory.” *Feminist Studies* 27:2 (2001), 468.

have replicated ontological views on gender and sex (as Hausman charges), with observations of transgender enframed by the insistence on binarism, they make transgender studies accessible to transgender people and laypersons alike.

Hausman's critique of anthropological and ethnographical research reflects an expectation of transgender studies to challenge the boundaries of gender binarism. I shall later address this expectation and fascination with the radical theoretical potential of transgender studies, which casts a shadow over the efforts of researchers to make transgender visible and understandable to an audience socialised in binarism. The reliance on binary logic to present transgender is read as an uncritical insistence by its detractors, who appear more intent on critiquing and dismantling binarism. It is in this clash of agenda and intentions that affect, if not undermine, the study and presentation of transgender. It begs the question of whether transgender studies should be oriented towards the political project of breaking gendered borders (and ending there), or the actual presentation of lived realities of transgender people. This thesis will later show the strengths, limitations and potential these positions possess. While these two positions appear at odds with each other, they do contribute to an understanding of the constraints transgender people face, sociological and textual, which are worth investigating.

3.4 The Trans-Agenda: Transphobic Feminism

A contentious yet compelling feature in the history of transgender theory is the book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, written in 1979 by Janice Raymond. Her work “instigated a feminist politics of hostility towards transgender people.”⁶⁵ It arrived at the end of a decade in which transsexuality was a cause for conflict and controversy in feminism, as it was deemed to have blurred the boundaries of womanhood. While this section specifically explores and critiques Raymond’s infamous book, she is not the only feminist writer who has been charged for being transphobic. There have been feminist commentaries that have reflected a negative attitude toward transsexuals,⁶⁶ such as those by Gloria Steinem⁶⁷ and Susanna Sturgis⁶⁸, which preceded *The Transsexual Empire*; and those that were published after 1980, such as pieces by Mary Daly,⁶⁹ Germaine Greer,⁷⁰ Margrit Eichler,⁷¹ Beth Walsh-Bolstad,⁷² Claudine O’Leary⁷³ and Sheila Jeffreys.⁷⁴ Professors of English Bernice Hausman⁷⁵ and Marjorie

⁶⁵ Sally Hines, *Transforming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), 87.

⁶⁶ Monica Kendel, Holly Devor, & Nancy Strapko, “Feminist and Lesbian Opinions about Transsexuals.” in *Gender Blending*, edited by Bonnie Bullough, Vern Bullough & James Elias (Buffalo: Prometheus Press, 1997), 146-159. In this piece, Kendel and others have also cited the following works covered in footnotes 69 to 77.

⁶⁷ Gloria Steinem, “If the Shoe doesn’t Fit, Change the Foot.” *Ms. Magazine*, February 1977, 76-86.

⁶⁸ Susanna Sturgis, “An Interview with Jan Raymond.” *Off Our Backs* 9 (1979), 14-16.

⁶⁹ Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁷⁰ Germaine Greer, ed., “Review of ‘Conundrum’ by Jan Morris.” in *The Madwoman’s Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (London: Picador, 1986), 189-191.

⁷¹ Margrit Eichler, “Sex Change Operations: The Last Bulwark of the Double Standard.” in *Gender Roles: Doing What Comes Naturally?* edited by E.D. Salamon & N. Robinson (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 67-78.

⁷² Beth Walsh-Bolstad, “The New, Improved (Surgically Constructed) Woman/Lesbian?” *Off Our Backs* 13:10 (1993): 14-23.

⁷³ Claudine O’Leary, “Commentary – Queer Politics.” *Off Our Backs* 22:1 (1994): 3-8.

⁷⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, “Heterosexuality and the Desire for Gender.” in *Theorising Heterosexuality: Telling it Straight*, edited by Diane Richardson (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1996), 75-90.

Sheila Jeffreys, “Transgender Activism: A Feminist Perspective.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 1:3/4 (1997): 55-74.

Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

Garber,⁷⁶ while not exclusively feminist writers, are also noted for their influential transgender misrepresentations.

The Transsexual Empire is the epitome of feminist hostility toward transgender. Radical and separatist feminism, and its commitment to binarism (particularly the order of male-born men and female-born women), could neither accommodate nor address transgender identities and their different levels of discrimination. A commonly used example of separatism is the disapproval of transgender presence and participation in feminist and female-exclusive circles, such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. The "womyn-born womyn" policy, while aiming to create spaces for female/woman-born-and-raised women, particularly discriminated against transgendered and transsexual women. Narratives of "male energy"⁷⁷ and (transmen's) "abandoning the female race"⁷⁸ were invoked to justify trans exclusion.

The radical – and almost separatist – feminism Raymond adheres to and espouses, contends that transsexualism, specifically male-to-female transitioning, is a social and political phenomenon, and a creation of the patriarchal medical establishment, from which norms of masculinity and femininity are derived. According to her, transsexual women are not women but "deviant males".⁷⁹ Transsexualism itself is "uniquely restricted patriarchy's definitions of

⁷⁵ Bernice Hausman, "Demanding Subjectivity: Transsexualism, Medicine, and the Technologies of Gender." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3.2 (1992): 270-302.

Hausman, *Changing Sex*.

⁷⁶ Marjorie Garber, "Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1.3 (1989): 137-59.

⁷⁷ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 101-106.

Andrée Collard & Joyce Contrucci, *Rape of the Wild: Man's Violence Against Animals and the Earth* (Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁷⁸ Hines, *Transforming Gender*, 88.

⁷⁹ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 183.

masculinity and femininity” and the transsexual is “body-bound by them and merely rejects one and gravitates toward the other.”⁸⁰ Believing the following are patriarchal tools of oppression, Raymond stands against sexual reassignment surgery and sexist counselling procedures.

Raymond contends that male energy, privilege and dominance lie beneath the transsexual veneer. She is critical of the implications posed by transsexing/transitioning, seeing these processes as governed by the oppressive patriarchal ordering of society. On the one hand, male-bodied persons abuse their male privilege to assume the desired bodies of male-constructed femininity, and Raymond likens this to rape. On the other, the desire of the female-bodied person to become male-bodied is indicative of one’s lust for the presumably superior male privileges attached to having a male body.⁸¹ Either way, the gendered status quo is preserved. Never has feminism – or rather a scholar in that tradition – launched such a scathing attack devaluing transgender subjectivity, reducing it to a function of male dominance.

For Raymond, who also echoes Simone de Beauvoir, the invention that is the feminine is very much a male project carried out by men for men. de Beauvoir remarked that men would have invented the woman if she did not exist.⁸² Raymond states “in this sense, it could be said that all women who conform to this invention are transsexuals, fashioned according to man’s image”; lesbian-feminists on the other hand are contrary to male inventiveness, and provide a

⁸⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁸¹ Ibid., 99-119.

⁸² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1953), 174.

“context in which women begin to create (them)selves in (their) own image.”⁸³

The deceptive transsexual hijacks the lesbian-feminist, and Raymond cites Sandy Stone as one culprit. For Raymond, this inauthentic transsexually-constructed lesbian-feminist *woman*, having acquired the “artifacts of female biology”, essentially remains a product of male inventiveness and is essentially a function of the patriarchal institution of medicine and culture. Such a monstrosity threatens women, even though the femininity which Raymond has discussed as to having been attached to women could render women as monstrosities (of male invention) themselves – one of many inconsistencies in her book.

Raymond singles out Stone, identifying her as one of the “transsexually constructed lesbian feminists (who) have inserted themselves into positions of importance and/or performance in the feminist community.”⁸⁴ Raymond likens the male-to-female transsexual Stone’s important position as a sound engineer in Olivia Records⁸⁵ to obtrusive masculine behaviour. Raymond reproduces a sentence from a letter by Rosemary Anderson, a woman concerned about Olivia Records’ non-acknowledgement of Stone’s *maleness*, and that a *man* was employed to be the sound engineer,

I feel raped when Olivia passes off Sandy, a transsexual, as a real woman. After all his male privilege, is he going to cash in on lesbian feminist culture too?⁸⁶

⁸³ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 106.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸⁵ Olivia Records is a collective founded in 1973 by lesbian feminists, aimed at recording and promoting women’s music.

⁸⁶ Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*, 103

Stephen Whittle believes Raymond's book had a devastating impact on transgender discourse by feminist theorists. *The Transsexual Empire*, he notes, greatly influenced feminist thought on transsexuals, who were seen as "misguided and mistaken men seeking surgery to fulfil some imaginary notion of femininity, and furthermore, upholding the gendered sex-role structure inherent in the patriarchal hegemony which sought to discredit feminist work." Moreover, the cause for this is due to Raymond's work, which has "discredited for a long time any academic voice (transgender people) might have, in particular, with feminist theorist."⁸⁷ One major contention with Raymond's book is that it glosses over the lived realities actually experienced by transsexuals, who faced with social and political constraints, have to carefully observe the articulation of (gender and sexual) individuality with respect to protecting their livelihood and wellbeing. Left wanting in Raymond's political and semiotic assessment of transsexuals are the basic socio-political and economic conditions that restrict transsexual freedom – a void that would be slowly filled by scholars in years to come.

Raymond's critique also exposed specific feminist assumptions, some of which are essentialist in nature. She says that transwomen and transmen are not men and women. In using the word "constructed" in terms such as "transsexually constructed" and "male-to-constructed-female", the authenticity of transsexed experiences and identities is suggested to be at best diminished, and worst, nonexistent. This is further accompanied by the assumption that birth and chromosomal sex, as ordered by social, legal and medical norms, determines the authenticity of gender identity. Any transformations transgressing this sex are

⁸⁷ Stephen Whittle, "Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender?" in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, edited by Richard Ekins & Dave King (New York: Routledge, 1996), 207.

unnatural. A transsexual woman is not and cannot be a woman because s/he is without the history of a woman. I believe Raymond intends for the *history* of a woman to comprise experiences informed by biology and gender-role socialisation specific and exclusive to biological females, which orientates them with the many forms of oppression later necessary for their subversion and liberalisation. Her refuting of transsexuality, right down to the usage of the description of “male-to-constructed-female transsexuals” (emphasis mine) reveals the assumption that any migration across the existing gender binary is illegitimate and a threat to women. However, it is patriarchal oppression itself that renders believable the essentialist idea in which individual sexed and gendered histories are exclusive and key features of a man or a woman. Patriarchy extends to naturalising and preserving the male-man and female-woman, an order rarely challenged as compared to that of the masculine-man and feminine-woman. The gender and sex role binary, a product of patriarchal oppression, continues to be safeguarded and unchallenged. Carol Riddell observes that Raymond also “adopts general propositions of patriarchal scientific ideology”, wherein sex is seen as chromosomally determined, despite attacking sex researchers for assuming biology and socialisation are destiny – a source of great incredulity for Riddell.⁸⁸

For Raymond, while transsexuals remain reiterations of male domination, there will always exist real and authentic – biologically born/determined – women, who are able to forge real, original and independent feminine identities. However, Raymond cannot be fully “credited” for robbing transgender people of

⁸⁸ Carroll Riddell, “Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*.” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, edited by Richard Ekins & Dave King (New York: Routledge, 1996), 117.

agency. Walter Williams⁸⁹ and Bernice Hausman⁹⁰ also do violence to transgender in the same way Raymond does. They see transsexuals as willing participants of patriarchy, biological determinism and male-dominated constructions of gender identity. Raymond's (over)reading into transgender bodies and politics reveals an over-estimation of male domination/female oppression, and a predisposition to collapse biological, genetic and physiological dichotomous categorisations of sex into gender binarism. Moreover, she conceptualises transsexuals as having no agency and who are unable to negotiate with the structures of sex, sexuality and gender in their respective milieu. Her many critics may have perhaps been a little too gracious when they refer to her as a sociologist.

Raymond's interpretation only presents a perspective which implicates transsexuals and situates them in the patriarchal fabric. Lacking sufficient transsexual accounts, her book sees not the struggles faced by transsexuals with respect to assimilation in a patriarchal society. It is apparent that some scholars preoccupy and indulge themselves in the function and implications of transsexual experiences and actions, situating them as subsets of a larger generalist theoretical framework. In the process, we overlook the form and context of transsexual experiences, and the need to assimilate into a society of gendered norms, culture and categorical orders. The failure to properly assimilate is greeted with social, economic, political, administrative and psychological repercussions. Such a realisation has pressed for more research and discourse oriented towards the contexts in which transsexuals and transgender people in general live.

⁸⁹ Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, 80.

⁹⁰ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, 141-174.

3.5 (Trans)Vested Interests: Queering Transgender

Janice Raymond's views, though later observed by transgender academics to be transphobic, have ironically continued to become a beacon for transgender theory. Her inability to reconcile one strain of feminism has ushered in other (less malicious) feminist takes on transgender, by scholars transgendered and/or feminist. The tradition of gender and transgender studies had also long been coloured by heteronormativity. This later invited queer approaches to gender studies and transgender theory.

Previous transgender theories were normally couched in heterosexist discourses and were not helped by the relative absence of gender- and sexually-queer narratives. In the 1990s, transgender theory took a queer twist, as theorists sought to distance the field from essentialist and heterosexist notions of transgender. Theory concerning (trans)gender rode on the momentum created by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, wherein she points out how heteronormality holds together the gender binary, which in turn serves to justify and naturalise heteronormality itself.

In 2008, C. L. Cole and Shannon Cate revisited Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience"⁹¹ and offered a transgender reading into her project on denaturalising heterosexuality.⁹² For them, Rich was sensitive to how the patriarchal tool of control that is heterosexuality was forced upon women. They read Rich to be suggesting that the contingency of

⁹¹ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York: Norton Paperback, 1994).

⁹² C. L. Cole & Shannon L. C. Cate, "Compulsory Gender and Transgender Existence: Adrienne Rich's Queer Possibility." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.3 & 4 (2008): 279-286.

heterosexuality lies on the male-female binary system and she invites women to question “the natural inevitability of their ‘choice’”.

As an alternative to what she conceives as male-identification in heteronormativity, Rich uses “lesbian continuum” and “lesbian existence” to break away from the heteronormative (historical and clinical) stranglehold on “lesbian”. Cole and Cate adapt Rich’s lesbian continuum and propose a transgender continuum as a means to reorganising queer politics. This imagination of a continuum provides not for a separation of the queer outsiders from the narrow frames of gender and sexuality, but according to Cole and Cate, for the building of political connections between male-born men and female-born women and those outside these known categories. Such a move challenges heteronormative as well as homonormative investments in binary gender, as it primarily problematises the naturality, emphasis and insistence on binarism as a lens through which straight and queer identities are understood and normalised.

Homonormativity is a term coined by Lisa Duggan, who critiqued neoliberalism and its impact on the organisation of LGBT in society.⁹³ Homonormativity sustains the heteronormative standards of gender identity, stratifying the LGBT community in terms of their worthiness to receiving rights. Heteronormative ideals and constructs, such as monogamous partnership, gender role binarism, adoption and procreation, are absorbed into queer identity, without ever being challenged. The resultant conservative gender-normative articulation of queer needs, integration and rights is couched in neoliberalism, which

⁹³ Lisa Duggan. *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Beacon Press, 2003).

characterises contemporary political and economic systems. This comes at the expense of economic redistribution and forwarding sexual diversity and freedom. With regards to this thesis, homonormativity's preservation of gender role binarism and emphasis on the indestructible categorical distinctions of sexuality has striking implications on the transgender and its articulation.

Cole and Cate are sensitive to the homonormative tokenism of transgender in queer politics, symbolically illustrated by the mere insertion of T after LGB and exemplified by real-world queer activism enframed by gay, lesbian and bisexual discourses and emphases on sexuality and sexual diversity. Transgender identity is consequently subsumed under the queer rubric. The transgender continuum Cole and Cate propose aims to reconceptualise and reorganise queer politics, orientating it away from homonormativity, and at the same time simplify the continuous project of inserting more letters to the LGB alphabet soup of sexual minority activism. This move also indicates a shift away from essentialist binary-gender logic, which has long come to circumscribe queer politics. In this reconfiguration, Cole and Cate classify the butch lesbian within the transgender continuum. For them, this has newer theoretical implications: One, the butch lesbian must be accounted for more than just her sexuality but also her performance of gender, an act nonetheless subversive of the gendered order of her society; two, the shift away from essential sex becomes more apparent. Cole and Cate state that "lesbians and gay men are in fact attracted to specific genders within the broad, clinical category of 'female' or 'male', and those genders require much more description than the all-but-meaningless labels 'woman' or 'man'." The categories of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" would then seem all but

over-generalising and inadequate in capturing the nuances of sexual identity and preference. While there may be a dearth of lexicon for the mainstream and the queer subterranean to make more sense of the intricacies of queerness, the transgender continuum now provides a new way to account for various queer identities and experiences. Such a conceptualisation of a continuum not only reprioritises gender identity before sexuality in queer identification, but also brings the transgender to the foreground of queer politics.

Some theorists felt the dominant heteronormative framing of transgender theory could neither explain nor account for the liminalities and complexities of transgender experiences. It resulted in the construction of rigid categories of transgender. This led to a rethinking of transgender – which involves the denaturalisation of heterosexuality/heteronormality – seeing it now as a superset accommodating any type of gender-queer identities, strewn across the axes of ethnicity, class and sexuality. Susan Stryker goes at length in describing her use of ‘transgender’ as a term

not to refer to one particular identity or way of being embodied but rather as an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual’s anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, psychical identifications with sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Susan Stryker, “The Transgender Issue: An Introduction.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4.2 (1998): 145-158.

Queer theory's influence is apparent. It provided for the denaturalisation and dismantling of (hetero)sexuality in transgender theory. Stryker likens transgender studies to be queer theory's "evil twin" as it "wilfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favour sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim."⁹⁵ However, she points out that sexuality is rendered incoherent in the absence of gender. Attention should thus be on the fluidity and (in)stability of gender and how it defines/problematises stable definitions of sexuality. Unfortunately, queer theory has often emphasised semiotics and sexuality, rather than the rootedness of sexuality in gender binarism,⁹⁶ which is where the emerging field of transgender studies is expected to contest.

The previous articulations of transgender experiences were limited and confined to popular but stifling feminist and queer lexicon. Transgender people had to locate themselves within the dominant discursive matrix of gender, sex and sexuality, and identify a position that best described themselves to a non-transgender cisnormative society. However this is at best an estimation fraught with limitations for it cannot accommodate those who, for instance, either oscillate or straddle between recognisable categories, or those who simultaneous occupy a multitude of categories and/or across different time periods. Recognising the risks of misrepresentation and symbolic annihilation, Sandy Stone thus proposes that transgender people begin to "articulate new narratives of self that

⁹⁵ Susan Stryker, "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2 (2004): 212.

⁹⁶ Califia, *Sex Changes*, 82.
Namaste, *Invisible Lives*, 39-70.

better expressed the authenticity of transgender experience".⁹⁷ These new narratives should withstand the hijacks by medico-psychiatric discourses, transphobic radical feminism and other cissexist/genderist heteronormative discourses. These articulations are however nuanced in their social and political contexts, as the next chapter will show.

Through Cole and Cate, as well as Susan Stryker whose arguments I will later discuss, we see that new insights and theoretical frameworks continually require our attention to the implications and extent to which gender, sex and sexuality are entwined and embodied, as well the extent to which individuals rely, or not, on these multiple axes to articulate their identities. These are the emerging problems in gender and sexuality that transgender studies have to deal with. Transgender studies have leapt out of the pot of heteronormativity and into the fire of cisgenderism, characterised by the silent emphasis on rigid gender binarism and its unchallenged compulsoriness as a base for sexual diversity, prejudicially organised according to gay-lesbian-bisexual discourses. Both ways, transgender articulation remain impaired.

⁹⁷ Stryker, *Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin*, 212.

4.0 The Challenges in Transgender Theory

The theory of transgender has been greatly changed thanks to the contributions of Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, Viviane Namaste, and Jay Prosser, among others. This chapter explores their arguments with respect to the issues concerning transgender theorisation – Romaniticisation, conceptualisation of agency and the consideration of the contexts in which transgender articulations are made.

Gender binarism and now stable categories of sexuality have been called into question as we seek to empower and discover newer narratives of gender and sexual identity that would have great impact on transgender and queer liberation. These are ideas spawned from the continuous questioning and “queer-ing” of the epistemic gender communities, power flows, and ideological institutions and structures that order society.

According to Janice Raymond and Bernice Hausman, transgender has been conceptualised as a mere function of male oppression and the prevailing gendered regime. They portrayed transgender as largely complicit in the preservation of heteronormative dimorphic binarism. This preservation is aided by medico-psychiatric experts, improving medical science and technologies, and greater communication within emergent transgender communities, all of which allow for the restoration of bodies according to the gendered logic. The political motivations of such scholars colour the extent to which they employ poststructuralist thought (in the case of Raymond) on their topics and subjects of study, in turn

(re)producing bodies of knowledge with social, political and academic ramifications, for them and their subjects.

As with the evolution of gender and its study, we are observing changes within and across academic schools with respect to transgender studies. New approaches in interdisciplinarity are emerging to create the next theory of transgender. Sociology is being upgraded with poststructuralist thought. Poststructuralism is being grounded in ethnography. The political conditions that underpin socialisation are now studied with respect to their political implications on the subjects of socialisation. Disciplinary approaches are now fluid and plural, and yield fluid and plural “results”. We now move beyond mere textualism or objectivism as various schools of thought are married – or involved in polyamorous union, whichever your orientation – to highlight both theory and its practical applications.

Amidst the intellectual chaos of multi-/inter-disciplinarity in the changing domain of transgender studies, key concepts and issues remain. Among them are subjectivity and context, important concepts that arise time and again..

4.1 The Transgender Looking Glasses

The study of transgender has been tainted by the many political agenda of various researchers of different disciplines. They are not without their social, political, moral and theoretical implications. The psychiatric and biomedical study of transgender – in particular transsexuality and transvestism – offers a medico-moral lens through which transgender may be viewed and an understanding of the extent to which *nature* and gendered norms are transgressed. They have attempted to identify a taxonomy of symptoms of deviance, locate transgenderal origins and propose *cures* that would allow for assimilation and reorientation. The classification of transgender as medical phenomenon has been criticised by Janice Raymond, Bernice Hausman and Sandy Stone (despite their other disagreements) as one that is functional to the patriarchal discourse of dimorphic binarism. The medical framing of transgender indicates the privileging of a particular social and physiological equilibrium, and the moral sense of normalcy attributed towards the restoration to this equilibrium. This also includes the assumption and defence that binarism is natural, as is heterosexuality and the alignment of gender, sex and sexuality.

The study of transgender as a social phenomenon debunks the naturalisation of gender, and its conflation with sex, pointing out its cultural contingency. It however encounters challenges. On the first level, in an attempt to study and introduce transgender to scholars and laymen alike, this study relies on the prevailing gendered logic to explain transgender. It has yielded criticism for this reliance. On the second level, this study has been charged to be not fulfilling

its radical theoretical potential in the subversion and dismantling of binarist hegemony.

Transgender studies have become another vessel, after gender studies, for the political agenda of those who seek to challenge binary boundaries. This challenge exists in different degrees, from the total dismantling and transcendence of binarism as suggested by Kessler and McKenna and Hausman, to the interrogation of male-dominated/gatekept binarism while essentially maintaining the divide between men/women categories as purported by Raymond. The challenging of binarism becomes a project taking top priority, and according to scholars like Namaste, Hale and Stryker, this comes at the expense of the study of transgender lived realities, their liveability and the interrogation of environmental conditions from which transgender articulations and representations are made. However, the textual and poststructuralist approaches which pave the way for an interrogation of gendered cultural logic and discursive formations centred on the reproduction of binarism, are important and bear some relevance to appreciating/understanding the context and constraints transgender people find themselves in. In view of this, I propose a harmonisation of sociological and textualist approaches, one complementing the other, while keeping in check one's fascination with the radical theoretical potential of transgender studies.

While it is inevitable transgender studies be differentially politically tainted, I believe the study of a discriminated and misunderstood minority is best done with the intention to lay the foundations for emancipation. We may still

indulge in romanticising the radical theoretical potential of transgender, but priority should be on the interrogation of the conditions from which transgender articulations and (re)presentations are made. The interrogation of these conditions/contexts is both sociological and textual in nature, a hybridised approach towards a more holistic understanding of transgender. It is not so much the goal of having the *perfect* transgender representation, but the cautious approach towards a transgender representation that also highlights the impediments that constrain it. The identification of these conditions and the politics that govern the relations that characterise these conditions is also necessary. This helps explore the social, cultural, political, textual and discursive dimensions of daily transgender lived realities, from which issues of social and political significance require attention.

In this section, I identify three key but overlapping areas in transgender studies that contribute to (and also constrain) various (mis)representations of transgender: The romanticisation that is the Great Transgender Promise; the conceptualisation of agency; and the interrogation of context. With the aid of observations and my interactions with transgender Singaporeans, I will discuss the impact, limitations and relevance of these items with respect to the Singaporean context.

4.2 Trans Romanticisation: The Great Transgender Promise

As observed by Stryker⁹⁸, Prosser⁹⁹ and Karen Nakamura,¹⁰⁰ there have been theorists who feel that transgender has yet to fulfil its great radical – and queer – potential in disrupting, destroying, restructuring and/or reorganising our understanding of gender, sex and sexuality. However, given this scholarly marvel at what I term as the “Great Transgender Promise”, they take little notice of the perilous journeys transsexuals and gender variant persons make as they traverse the monolithic gendered terrain. In this “Great Transgender Promise”, they believe the ingredients for a politics of gender diversity are located in transgender articulations, embodiment and theory. In this section, I explore the need to balance textualist approaches to transgender studies with sociological inquiry. The idea of discussing and evaluating the radical theoretical potential of transgender remains relevant and complementary to a sociological interrogation of the conditions that shape and constrain transgender articulation.

Empirically informed studies are susceptible to a multitude of misrepresentations and misreadings. We infer from these readings the readiness of researchers to *trouble* heteronormativity or gender binarism, and use the study of transgender as a means to achieving theoretical high ground, regardless of whether these studies actually serve a direct purpose for transgender liberation. On the one hand, using transgender as a site for a discursive counter-movement that challenges the oppressive, rigid and transphobic structures of binarism, in the process justifying the advocacy for gender and sexual diversity, may prove to be

⁹⁸ Stryker, *Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin*.

⁹⁹ Prosser, *Second Skins*.

¹⁰⁰ Karen Nakamura, “Narrating Ourselves: Duped or Duplicitous?” in *Gender Blending*, edited by Bonnie Bullough, Vern Bullough & James Elias (Buffalo: Prometheus Press, 1997), 74..

useful. In looking at the historical, political and textual dimensions of transgender lived realities and articulations, this perspective allows us to identify and focus our attention on the constraints and problems caused by specific dominant discourses. And from within these discourses, we may locate sites for subversion and emancipation, as this thesis will show with Stryker's "monster" metaphor and my observation of Singaporean examples. On the other hand, the process of locating within the transgender sites for subverting and dismantling binarism, may ultimately lead to the exclusion of the transgender subject. The latter is precisely the pitfall of the "Great Transgender Promise", in which the utility of transgender studies is maximised to fight the cultural war against heterosexism and gender binarism, rendering the transgender subject a mere pedestrian. This romanticisation of the transgender, which results in dreamy and promising theorisations of subversion and counter-discourses, has to be ultimately firmly rooted in addressing the (mis)representations of transgender.

There is the expectation that transgender narratives and embodiment are the much needed cavalry to turn the tides of the discursive and cultural war, taken up by researchers with an agenda to instate binary gender (and also heteronormativity) as above all a mere social construction, arbitrary across space and time, contingent on the norms of the land. This is the battle selected by these researchers who largely omit the central subjects of the study and what they actually have to offer. Transgender studies as such have become a proxy for the larger war against Gender and the institutions of thought that have come to categorically limit our knowledge of sex, gender and sexuality. They all go the way of Janice Raymond, silencing the transgender voice and doing violence to

them. In Raymond's case, she "studied" the transsexual with a view to preserve the exclusivity female/women's space, hence her prejudicial readings of transsexuality.

The "Great Transgender Promise" is damaging to transgender people. Those who advocate this and who are schooled in feminist and queer theory, are especially complicit. They theorise the flimsiness of gender, upon which taxonomical sexuality is contingent and without which sexuality is rendered incoherent, and plot transgender identities as pawns on the grid of gender and sexuality and draw the imaginary gradients that slope in favour to our feminist and/or queer agenda. Also, transgender subjectivities, bodies and narratives have become sites for theorising *trouble*, as demanded by scholars like Bernice Hausman.¹⁰¹ In the process, the transgender person is decentred and displaced in transgender studies.

The study and theoretical derivations of transgender allow us to understand, sociologically and textually, the relationships, structures, ideologies and discourses in which we are situated. In indulging "Great Transgender Promise", we risk not linking these observations back to transgender people, the very subjects that inspired these theorisations. From the works of Stryker, Prosser and Namaste, we see how they have entertained the educated inferences and theoretical derivations of transgender studies in relation to the nature of transphobic oppression as experienced on a daily basis. They serve as examples to scholars on how the radical yet exotic allure of the "Great Transgender Promise"

¹⁰¹ Hausman, *Recent Transgender Theory*.

may be tamed and oriented around and back to the central transgender subject. In the quest to smash boundaries, challenge paradigms and shatter seemingly stable constructs, we have to evaluate how these exercises and projects actually relate to transgender oppression and empowerment, and the extent to which they are helpful to transgender liberation.

Apart from using studies of transgender as a project to challenge binary gender, we have seen in the case of Cole and Cate their conceptualisation of the transgender continuum as a model for reimagining and reorganising the queer. The centrality of transgender is again compromised, this time for the sake of dismantling the rigid LGBT categorisation of queer. Nowhere in Cole and Cate's article do we see how this proposal of a transgender continuum and reimagination would help elevate transgender discourses within the LGBT community, never mind larger society.

This is the Great Transgender Promise. There are expectations heaped onto transgender to be a site for the subversion of binarism, or to serve as beacons for reevaluations of theory. Their lives and narratives are treated as texts, whose analyses are used for projects other than for their emancipation. Echoing Stone and Stryker, I believe the approach to transgender studies and theory should prioritise the transgender subject and the realities he/she faces. In turning our attention to these areas, we will be able to locate the issues in need of addressing at the level of society, policy and law. These are the steps taken to be taken in transgender research to restore centrality to the transgender subject.

4.2.1 Centring Transgender

Viviane Namaste argues for transgender centrality in transgender studies.¹⁰² She remains critical of the contributions and influence of mainstream sociology and poststructuralist queer theory to the field, believing both fields do not adequately address one key aspect of the transgender experience, which is the transsexual sex change. She challenges the touristic gaze at the exotic transgender adopted by researchers and theorists in the field, which belies specific research agendas that are in no way relevant or representative of actual transgender lived experiences. According to her, queer theory “begins its analysis with little thought of the individuals designated as the objects of study,” and its “selection and interpretations of evidence is guided by its understanding of poststructuralist thought”, which is derived from a tradition “characterised by a refusal to accept individual social agents as ‘masters’ of their lives, identities, and worlds.”¹⁰³ Namaste’s contention with queer theory is in the selection of texts by queer theorists, which already constitutes “a social process that embodies the production of knowledge and discourses on sexual and gendered objects,”¹⁰⁴ which is essentially blinkered and insensitive to the lived realities of transgender people. For her, research should address and engage the quotidian concerns transgender people face, on top researcher self-interrogation.

Ideas from her critique of sociology (deviance models in particular) which for instance, identify homosexuality in relation to naturalised and stabilised heterosexuality, can be appropriated for this approach to transgender. A

¹⁰² Viviane Ki Namaste, “The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality.” *Sociological Theory* 12.2 (1994): 220-231. Namaste, *Invisible Lives*.

¹⁰³ Namaste, *Invisible Lives*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

poststructuralist approach to transgender in this case would entail the focus on the cultural logic that produces and omits transgender subjectivity via trivialisation and/or misrepresentation, and also on the reproduction of the naturalised and stabilised institution of gender itself.

Namaste raises the significance of researcher political agenda in transgender research, and the extent to which this influences the framing and (mis)representation of transgender. Such political agenda may involve the defence and maintenance of the bipolar institution of sex and gender, or the attempt to trivialise and relativise gender itself – two positions that maximise the theoretical utility of transgender being without ever bringing to the fore pressing transgender issues. Whether it is the engagement with text and semiotics, or the study of implications of social action and behaviour on existing structures of knowledge and social order, research is either way far removed from the actual (transgender) subjects of study.

Namaste also evaluates Butler's theorisation of drag as parody. Namaste seeks to contextualise Butler's view of drag as the imitation of gender reflecting the imitative structure of gender itself. Far from being an example of conscious subversion of dominant gender norms and performance, exposing the heterosexist truth-regime of sex and gender, the context in which drag resides is problematic. Drag is only legitimised in the space of the night club and in the domain of entertainment. Namaste suggests a closer examination of the context and the kind of politics that appear to provide the illusion of empowerment and subversion; a lack of contextualisation will, in this case, undermine our understanding of drag as

parody. The reading of drag as parody has to be accompanied by the awareness of actual transgender subjectivity within specific social contexts and constraints.

4.2.2 Centring Transgender Articulations

One component of investigating transgender subjectivity and restoring transgender centrality is the observation of how transgender people identify themselves and navigate the labels in the queer and transgender taxonomies. In April 2009 at the National Museum of Singapore, Canadian male-to-female transsexual Madison Kelly came to Singapore to promote a documentary, *Girl Inside*, which featured transformative experiences leading up to her feminisation and sexual reassignment surgery.¹⁰⁵ In a session organised by the local LGBT community, she referred to her transsexuality as a past phase and that she was now a woman. Madison said she regarded her transsexual history as an important part of her personhood even though she would now prefer to identify and be identified as a woman. This is fundamentally because she sees herself as emotionally a woman, and physiologically, she is now female-bodied.

Madison Kelly's account goes against the grain of dominant LGBT discourse of queer identities, in which the permanence of queer-ness is assumed and emphasised. Her transsexuality was a phase that is now over. The legitimacy of LGBT liberation movement in Singapore is premised on the salience and permanence of diverse sexual identities, which explains why many in the community have made the calls for those of non-heterosexual orientation, to come out.

My interaction with Madison reminds me of Leona Lo, a formerly male-bodied and one of the most visible and vocal transwomen in Singapore. Like

¹⁰⁵ *Girl Inside*, film (2007; Red Queen Productions).

Madison Kelly, she identifies as a heterosexual woman. However, Leona is conscious and selective when it comes to the articulation of her gender identity. She may firstly identify as an “ordinary woman”,¹⁰⁶ but in the domain of LGBT rights advocacy, in particular transgender advocacy, she uses *trans(gender) woman* and *transsexual* to identify herself. This serves well to align her with the queer movement. I shall emphasise and assess the context of her articulation in the next sections.

The next two sections on conceptualising agency and interrogating context are two areas of focus I believe in need of addressing, and prioritised before one indulges in the Great Transgender Promise. Transgender scholars like Viviane Namaste, Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker, have long been calling for research that explore and interrogate the lived realities of transgender people. The study of these realities involves the evaluation of the environments in which transgender subjects are situated and narratives are derived. This is at the same time constrained by the extent to which transgender agency is conceived and conferred by researchers, as we have observed transgendered subjects being portrayed as either victims or villains, willing or coerced parties in binarism.

This is not to say we should altogether discard the theoretical potential of transgender, but rather reposition it with respect to the restoration of centrality to the transgender subject. The theoretical potential of transgender should be located within transgender subjectivities, narratives and the conditions from which these narratives derive, at the same time serving to further develop frameworks and

¹⁰⁶ She titles her weblog “musings of an ordinary woman”. See <http://leonalo.wordpress.com/>

dialogue for understanding the situatedness of transgender in specific cultural and political milieus. It is necessary and at times inevitable that we have to explore the theoretical implications of our transgender research, on transgender subjects as well as on other frameworks that constrain transgender discourses. However, I believe attention on these theoretical implications should be focused on how we can mobilise theory for, primarily, transgender liberation, instead of the exercise of challenging/dismantling gender binarism – unless there is a return of scholarly focus to the transgender subject following this theoretical/political exercise. Until that happens, transgender scholars like Stryker will remain aggrieved by this Great Transgender Promise.

4.3 The Conceptualisation of Agency

Another key component in transgender (mis)representation is the conceptualisation of transgender agency. More specifically, I refer to the extent to which researchers conceive and confer agency to their transgender subjects. Do we conceive of transgender as subjects constituted in power/discourse and in language, confined, constrained and agent-less (i.e. not the masters of their own fates)? Or do we conceive of transgender as a site for negotiation and resistance?

This problem represents the clash of disciplinary approaches to studying transgender. I refer to Jacob Hale¹⁰⁷ and Bernice Hausman's¹⁰⁸ views on transgender "subjectivity". Hale expresses concern with the denial of transgender subjectivity,¹⁰⁹ which is the result of theorisations of transgender people he deems largely misrepresentative, as they trivialise, generalise and omit transgender participation. His gripe is that transgender subjectivity remains shaped and defined by non-transgender "experts" and transphobic theorists. This implies that there lies a more *authentic* transgender voice waiting to be heard; and that this articulation presents a more accurate depiction of transgender. Conversely, Hausman believes that the demands for transgender "subjectivity" are mere reiterations of the gender order according to the patriarchal medical establishment. How do we deal with this tension? Should we work on the belief that transgender persons are the masters of their fates and are able to present a more accurate and *authentic* articulation of identity; or do we begin the investigation of transgender with the poststructuralist view that transgender subjectivity is already constituted

¹⁰⁷ Hale, *Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans* _____.

¹⁰⁸ Hausman, *Changing Sex*.

¹⁰⁹ This position is also shared by Stone, Stryker and Whittle.

in prevailing binarist and transphobic discourses, a position that baits the invalidation of transgender agency/autonomy? Are transgender persons agents in the sociological sense, or in poststructuralism? These tensions will be explored shortly.

4.3.1 Struck by Stone: Going Posttranssexual

Sandy Stone reads Janice Raymond as “claiming that transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallocratic empire and were designed to invade women’s spaces and appropriate women’s power.”¹¹⁰ She notes how transgender voices have become silenced and argues how our relationships with the media and the intellectual elite play a role in creating a particular knowledge of transgender, which is also further reproduced by transsexuals themselves.

In her paper “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”, the title an obvious jibe at Raymond’s book, Stone raises the complicity of the medico-psychiatric establishment, namely ‘gender dysphoria’ diagnoses and gender identity clinics which demanded the fulfilment of categories, definitions and criteria of gender as it is widely understood and performed. Unlike Raymond who believes that transsexuals willingly reproduce gender binarism, Stone problematises and politicises the relationship transsexuals have with the medico-psychiatric establishment. Subtle, yet telling, she reveals how the definition of transsexual has come to encompass the adjective of “opposite” – as in the identification with the “opposite” gender – which implies and pre-validates gender binarism, a process and outcome that limit the scope for articulation of transgender identity.

It is the establishment that recognises and perpetuates gender binarism, a scenario that compels transsexuals seeking to be aligned with their gender identity to articulate their concerns and expectations in a way understood by professionals

¹¹⁰ Stone. *The Empire Strikes Back*, 221-235.

in the establishment. This was the context which Raymond had somehow skirted. As mentioned in the previous section, Raymond's politicisation of the institution and transsexuals overlooks the actual conditions, lived experiences and challenges transsexuals face. The manner in which transsexuals seek therapy and/or surgery has been uncritically interpreted to be a reproduction of gender binarism, and is moreover reflective of Raymond's political agenda.

Through Stone, we become wary of readings by scholars such as Raymond and Bernice Hausman¹¹¹ of the transgendered as "willing" participants and subjects of binary conformity. There are social and political conditions that underpin the apparent "willingness", but become either less salient or invisible through scholars like Raymond and Hausman. Stone, Susan Stryker, Viviane Namaste, Jay Prosser, among many others, have explained that conformity and assimilation are to various extents coerced, and that the contexts from which "willingness" is observed should be conscientiously investigated. I shall elaborate on their views in the next section.

The existing pre-occupation with the definition and constituents of gender dysphoria, the ceaseless search for "a taxonomy of symptoms, criteria for differential diagnosis, procedures for evaluation, reliable courses of treatment and thorough follow-up", according to Stone, indicates the agenda researchers have in engaging transsexuality. This in turn influences how transition-seeking persons articulate their condition and identity. Stone's sociological critique reveals that surgery-seeking transsexuals are clearly aware of what they want (i.e. surgery) and

¹¹¹ Hausman, *Changing Sex*.

of their position in relation to the medico-psychiatric establishment, and see the evaluation criteria for surgery as merely another hurdle to clear. This leads to the transsexual unambiguous expression of Harry Benjamin's criterion, put in its simplest form – the *wrong body* argument. It is through the imperative of the biomedical diagnostic criteria that leads to the clinical erasure of transsexuals.¹¹²

Stone notes how various institutions in the mid-Twentieth Century played their part in weaving the binary-ordered transsexual narrative. The literature of medico-psychiatric establishment had traditionally made transitioning appear to be a distinct two-stage process, from one gender/sex to another, rendering invisible the liminality of sex and gender as experienced and embodied by the patient. The clinics as observed by Stone offered more than surgery, but also socialisation and grooming. Not every transsexual person could fully assimilate into his or her new role without acquiring the knowhow for passing. The normative conflation of sex in gender was also untouched, unmentioned and sustained in these accounts. Even the transsexual autobiographies identified by Stone were complicit in this discourse on sex-gender congruity. Stone notes:

All these authors replicate the stereotypical male account of the constitution of women: Dress, makeup, and delicate fainting at the sight of blood. Each of these adventurers passes directly from one pole of sexual experience to the other. If there is any intervening space in the continuum of sexuality, it is invisible. And nobody ever mentions wringing the turkey's neck.¹¹³

¹¹² Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 230.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 227.

The act of “wringing the turkey’s neck” refers to penile masturbation prior to surgical castration in sexual reassignment surgery. Stone identifies this as a rite of passage that, if not invisible, would trouble the prevailing discourse of transsexuality and the gendered and sexed order upon which it is structured. This note later paved the way for queer inquiry into transgender theory. Stone’s critique also suggests that we focus our attention on the conditions that coerce such replication, from the authors, publishers, medical authority, to that of mid-Twentieth Century society and its mores.

Stone’s paper-cum-response was intimate in nature, with numerous first-person mentions. This intimacy, in contrast with Raymond’s book, is telling in the sense that it involves both the autobiographical account and the politics of the individual with respect to the topic of the paper. It relativises the idea of *truth* in (trans)gender by involving, first-hand, the account of the topic’s chief stakeholder. For Stone, transsexuals are the voiceless and least empowered in theorising transgender. They remain “infantilised” and treated as “too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity.”¹¹⁴ Stone calls on gender variant people to step forward and reclaim the transgender/transsexual narratives once dominated by non-transgender feminists and researchers, as well as the medico-psychiatric establishment. A counter-discourse is long overdue, and Stone has laid the foundations for what would be a posttranssexual discourse on transsexuality.

¹¹⁴ Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 229-230

4.3.2 The Transgender Agent

Sandy Stone is the first to highlight the violence done to transgender in research, depriving transgender of its voices and subjectivities. She notes

(a)s with males theorising about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency. As with genetic women, transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert and destroy ‘true’ women.¹¹⁵

Stone is concerned with the misrepresentations of transgender perpetuated by Janice Raymond in particular, as well as the implications of these misrepresentations. In depriving transgender its agency, transgender will be resultantly read as a product of discursive formations, steered by male domination. At the same time, transgender voices are trivialised and erased through their misrepresentations.¹¹⁶ Stone believes that transgendered individuals should “read themselves aloud” and be heard. At the same time, she also recognises the limitations of conceptualising agency and acknowledges that “to attempt to occupy a place as speaking subject within the traditional gender frame is to become complicit in the discourse which one wishes to deconstruct”¹¹⁷ – a poststructuralist dilemma.

¹¹⁵ Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 229-230.

¹¹⁶ Jacob Hale, *Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans* _____, n.d. <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>.

¹¹⁷ Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 230.

Hopeful and seeing transgender's "promise", Stone believes the subversive potential of transgender parallels Judith Butler's views on the "butch" and "femme" lesbian categories.¹¹⁸ That the resignified "masculinity" of the butch is placed on the culturally intelligible female body at the same time proves both the recollection/replication of heterosexual gendering, and its displacement. The processes of feminisation, masculinisation and gender-bending may be mere reconfigurations of established gender identities on the backdrop of culturally intelligible bodies, but Stone locates its theoretical relevance in the negotiation of boundaries that "reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries".¹¹⁹ Similarly, Karen Nakamura, citing Foucault,¹²⁰ believes subversion and resistance are located within power and oppression:

This (Western sex/gender) system of knowledge surrounding our bodies and how we construct our understanding of our lives provides the space through which transsexual women come to identify themselves and also the ground from which they can launch their subversion. In Foucault's parlance, it embeds both oppression and resistance. Subversion operates through the same thematic genres that power does.¹²¹

Stone anchors the theoretical significance of transgender's disruptive energy in transgender subjectivity. She calls for more transgender participation and voices, which in turn leads to demands for newer theoretical frameworks for the *benefit* of transgender people, namely emancipation.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 230-231.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 231.

¹²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹²¹ Nakamura, *Narrating Ourselves*, 82.

4.3.3 Whose Trans Voice is it Any Way

Pat Califia, Bernice Hausman, Janice Raymond and Virginia Prince, among others, recognise transsexual people as intelligent, information-seeking individuals well aware of their social and political environment. In this view, there are no surprises when these transsexual narratives are read as functions of the male-dominated institutions of biomedicine and psychiatry. Transsexuals, for instance, are seen as willing participants and (re)producers of binarism. However, it is important to note that the concern of being read or misread figures in how transsexuals/transgender people read and present themselves – a symbiotic relationship between articulator and (mis)reader worthy of both sociological and textual scrutiny.

At the same, the degree of “willingness” conferred to transsexuals differs from scholar to scholar. Janice Raymond reads transsexing as a means to obtain the political privileges ascribed to the respective sexes. Transsexuals are thus conceived as perpetrators of patriarchy, with male-bodied individuals assuming the male-desired/constructed traits of femininity, and female-bodied individuals ready to become male because they desire the power associated with the masculine. Transsexing, for Raymond, is a rational navigation of the gendered logic of society by transsexuals.

Raymond sees the authority of the biomedical establishment, in particular with regards to sexual reassignment surgery for transsexual patients, as a euphemism for patriarchal authority. Transsexuals are seen both as subjects constituted in medical discourse, and also its active and willing enforcers. Also

critical of medical discourse's constitution of transgender subjectivity is Stephen Whittle who believes such a position "makes transgender people out to be simultaneously self-interested and decidedly barmy."¹²² Either way, transgender agency here is seen as illusory, functional to the discourses that constitute it.

On the other hand, Califia and Prince point to the formation of transgender communities in which information is conveniently exchanged on hormonal change, sexual reassignment surgery and the necessary acts and actions required to gain access to these procedures. Transsexuals, who seek physiological alignment with the gender/sex of their choice, reproduce the relevant medico-psychiatric symptoms and narratives to gain access to sex change. Harry Benjamin's book inspired a wave of sexual reassignment surgery-seeking people, as it "provided the behavior that led to acceptance of surgery".¹²³ In learning to exhibit the behaviours recognised by the medical establishment, pre-operative transsexuals gain access to surgery. Virginia Prince quips that transsexualism had become a "communicable disease", wherein the more awareness it gained, the larger the number of people who identify with it¹²⁴. This view is echoed by Karen Nakamura, as she observes the duplication of transgender narratives of "wrong body", "playing with dolls" and "being trapped", in the domain of cyberspace readily accessible to other transition-seeking transsexuals.¹²⁵ Transsexuals are observed to calibrate their behavioural and emotional patterns to match these medically and psychiatrically established transsexual diagnoses. This is why

¹²² Stephen Whittle, "Where did we go wrong? Feminism and Trans Theory – Two Teams on the Same Side?" in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 199.

¹²³ Sandy Stone, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 228.

¹²⁴ Prince. *Understanding Cross Dressing*.

¹²⁵ Nakamura, *Narrating Ourselves*, 74-86.

Stephen Whittle believes the medical discourse surrounding transgendered behaviour hampers discussions of gender by the transgendered community.¹²⁶ Far from being the “willing” participants of medico-moral norms informed by patriarchy à la Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* and Hausman’s *Sex Changes*, transsexuals who seek to be aligned with their gender/sex of their choice are constrained by the pathologisation of gender deviance as gender dysphoria.

¹²⁶ Stephen Whittle, “Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender? Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending.” in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, edited by Richard Ekins & Dave King (New York: Routledge, 1996), 207.

4.3.4 Stryker's Monster and Rage

Echoing Stone's call for authentic transgender articulation of identity, Susan Stryker recounts her self-conscious performance of queer gender at an interdisciplinary conference, a reflection that opened her paper "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage."¹²⁷ She identified as – and also embodied – a male-to-female transsexed leatherdyke lesbian. The fact there remains absent a single noun that could capture and explain her identity reveals how problematic (the English) language is in accommodating gender variant queer identities and traits. Stryker provides a conscious literal interpretation of Judith Butler's concept of performance. As gendered traits are normalised and naturalised through social processes, wherein certain known combinations infer a culturally recognised gender, a social order is created based on this dichotomy. In Stryker's case, not to be mistaken for an attention-seeking act, she threw a spanner in the gender works and jammed the conventional discourse on transsexuals. She is queer, has a son from her previous marriage, has a daughter with her female partner, and has a family uncategorisable by conventional standards. She uses her selfhood, life and embodiment to narrate her *gender*, at the same time revealing the nebulous mishmash of sexuality and gender.

Stryker likens the transsexual to that of the literary Doctor Frankenstein's monster. The Mary Shelley story follows the journey of the man-made monstrosity who is more than what its creator has intended, resulting in its rejection and exile. It is during the period of its exile that the monster acquires the

¹²⁷ Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244-256

ability of language, communication and an understanding of culture from observations of human society. It becomes self-aware through its observations of the De Lacey family, and attempts to befriend them. However, its appearance frightens the family and they attack him. This fills the monster with rage as it seeks vengeance against its creator. It eventually returns to confront its creator and tell its story to him, not before killing those who are close to him.

Like the monster, the transsexual is an unnatural creation of the biomedical establishment. The transsexual is diagnosed, described, medicalised, pathologised and labelled by “experts” whose labels are taken up by society, and who is well aware of his/her difference from earliest memory. The transsexual is dehumanised through these frames and labels, but acquires his/her sense of identity and being from observing the gendered behaviours and mannerisms of the society that oppresses him/her (c.f the monster’s acquiring its sense of *humanity* by observing and learning the ways of society). Similar to the case of the monster and its relationship with the human community, the very tools and cultural cues of *normal* society required for the articulation of transsexual/transgender identity and the potential for liberation are located well within an oppressive gendered domain they inhabit. Stryker inserts herself into the role of the monster and explains, like monster, she now knows the history of her creation – the transsexual biomedical creation – and how the scientific convention continues to “contain and colonize the radical threat posed by a particular transgender strategy of resistance to the coerciveness of gender.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Ibid., 249.

As with Frankenstein's monster, the transsexual monstrosity has to deal with its pathologisation, having its lived experiences and feelings dismissed as "emotional disorder" and "diseased", a sentiment shared by Stone on the perceived emotional and intellectual inferiority of transsexuals. Furthermore, it is the seemingly inescapable nature of language that restricts and perpetuates *the* articulation of material reality, from which emerges what Stryker coins "transgender rage". It is the inability to follow the norms of gendered embodiment plus society's rejection that drives this rage. However, this rage also provides the means for the "disidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions."¹²⁹

Stryker's metaphor of the monster also resonates with the realities faced by transgender people within wider LGBT communities dominated by gay/lesbian/bisexual-centric politics and discourses, privileging and prioritising narratives of normalised sexuality built upon the emphasis and insistence of gender as the indivisible denominator. This has resulted, as later shown in the thesis, in carefully calibrated transgender articulations within the LGBT community, indicative of the transgender monstrosity observing the codes of the community and acquiring the "culture" and "language" necessary – accurate or not – for articulation of identity.

Combining theory and activism, Stryker suggests that transgender, gender variant and gender queer people should seize the opportunity to rearticulate themselves and (dis)associate/identify with their respective gendered milieu. The inescapability of this discursive order can be negotiated with the transgender

¹²⁹ Ibid., 253.

mobility through it. Like Frankenstein's monster, the transgendered has long observed the workings of gendered society and it is now time for them to speak up.

4.3.5 Transgender Articulations in Singapore

There are medico-psychiatric diagnoses such as Gender Identity Disorder which influence the ordering of binary society. The discomforts with body, body image and socialisation are articulated by transsexuals through the frames of pathology, because any other articulation will not grant them access to procedures for change. In this view, transsexual people are not the perpetrators of gender stereotypes, but victims, constrained by contemporary medical norms and gender stereotypes as they negotiate their identities.

There is an international campaign today to depathologise transsexualism, aimed at arresting the domineering medical and psychiatric gaze of transgenderism.¹³⁰ This includes the removing Gender Identity Disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, abolishing binary normalisation of intersexed persons, free access to hormonal and surgical treatments without psychiatric monitoring and improving public awareness and education on transgender issues. This campaign is indicative the efforts of transgender activists as they aim to loosen medicine's stranglehold on transgender.

In line with Sandy Stone's view of a posttranssexual theory in which transsexuality, and to a lesser extent, transgender, is wrested from the domineering grasps of the medico-psychiatric institution, and reclaimed by transgender people, I return to the examples of Madison Kelly and Leona Lo. They exemplify how transgender people negotiate with the labels which have been steeped in particular

¹³⁰ See the Stop Trans Pathologization 2012 campaign, organised by the International Network for Trans' Depathologization. <http://www.tgeu.org/node/75>

histories and politics. While large parts of Kelly's and Lo's social and professional lives hinge on their feminisation/femininity and passing, they openly but cautiously acknowledge their transsexuality as they champion transgender rights. The accounts of Kelly and Lo appear to show that we do not have to occupy a particular category, and that the different aspects and historical phases of a singular personhood, may either straddle across different groups or simultaneously occupy heterogeneous categories. The decisions they make in articulating their identities constitute an alternative transgender discourse. We may have arrived at the point where we begin to reiterate Butler's suggestion of a world with multiple configurations of gender, sex and sexuality, but what would be more *troubling* than to have simultaneous occupation of various categories.

Apart from the constraints posed by pathologisation, transsexual people are also subjected to criticism for their attempts to pass. The charges of transsexual reproduction of gendered stereotypes, or hyperfemininity in male-to-female transsexuals for others, are levelled against transsexual people who try to pass in the gender of their choice. It is difficult to ascertain as to whether transsexual people are willing or coerced into the decisions they make, with either view steeped in its own politics and having great bearing on how one conceptualises transgender agency. I believe this has to be balanced with the interrogation of the environment in which this transsexual "willingness" to pass or conform is observed. I shall return to this issue on context and discuss it in detail in the next section.

Jacob Hale wrote a set of suggested rules for non-transsexuals (namely people who are cisgender/sexual) writing about transsexuality, which to a large extent also pertains to non-transgendered researchers writing about transgender.¹³¹ While Hale's list warns against the pitfalls of uncritical research, lack of self-interrogation and oversights that might misrepresent or silence transgender voices, it paints a picture of what most transgender scholars would expect transgender studies to be about. The list represents both an attempt to reclaim transgender discourses and to dictate the direction, pace and trajectory at which transgender theory should develop. Along with the calls for greater transgender participation by Sandy Stone, Hale's rules appear to suggest that transgender people, through their participation and first-person narratives, provide a more *authentic* transgender representation.

It is the impression of *authenticity* or the lack of it that informs the conceptualisation and conferring of agency to transgender subjects in research. Hale is concerned about the denial of transgender subjectivity, which I believe is a reaction to Janice Raymond's conception of transsexuals as minions of patriarchy, and Bernice Hausman's view that transsexuals willingly present themselves as medical subjects to gain access to sex change.¹³² Hale thus encourages the self-interrogation of research agenda before the actual study of transgender, as he believes it is the transphobic agenda of Raymond and Hausman which inspire their approaches to the research. For Hale, such (mis)representations by Raymond and Hausman strip transgender people of their "subjectivity". What Hale wants to point out is that such decisions made autonomously by transgender people are the

¹³¹ Hale, *Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans* _____. Also see Annex A.

¹³² Hausman, *Sex Changes*, 110-140.

result of socially aware compromises and negotiation, and that the lack of diligence and critical inquiry on the part of Raymond and Hausman have resulted in their misreading of transgender, leading to generalisation, trivialisation and objectification (in patriarchy and medical authority) of this transgender agency/autonomy. Raymond and Hausman belong to the camp that believes that transgender agency and autonomy are illusory, give their constitution in medical and patriarchal discourses, which indicative of the poststructuralism – value/agenda-tainted nonetheless – that orientates their analyses. Because of this, transgender persons are not treated seriously or respectfully, but are subjected (again) to trivial (mis)readings informed by a political agenda that decentralises the transgender subject from the study in favour of other political and cultural projects such as the defence of female spaces, the insistence of binarism or the dismantling of binarism. We are faced with the potential erasure of the transgender person in these poststructuralist and textual analyses. The conceptualisation of transgender subjectivity and agency is skewed towards the sets of questions indicative of their disciplinarity, and is not without the repercussions of misrepresentation and violence.

However, the transgender acts of negotiation and compromise within binarism are also potential sites for the reclamation of transgender discourses. I argue for a re-reading of transgender agency/subjectivity as being shaped and constituted in patriarchal gender hegemonic discourse. The reiterations of narratives indicative of the reproduction of such a discourse can also be read as attempts by transgender persons to articulate themselves using these reconfigurations. The act of reconfiguration done within this oppressive domain

reflects the journey of Susan Stryker's "monster" as it acquires the gendered cultural ways of society but learns to discover its individuality. The act of reconfiguration itself is a political process, while read to be constituted in patriarchal binarist power, possesses the potential to trouble the very boundaries that define this power.

In an example of reiteration as subversive reconfiguration, Leona Lo wrote, staged and starred in a play in 2009 documenting her life and titled it "The Ah Kua Show", a reference to the various dancing and seedy performances of male-to-female transsexuals and cross-dressers across Southeast Asia. In one scene, she reacted to all the rejections and downfalls she has had, and rages against it. She echoed her abuse, "Just another fucking Ah Kua!" before rising from her slump and living her life as she wanted without the fears that once impeded her. Singaporeans and Malaysians are well acquainted with the term "Ah Kua Show", which invokes performances of song, dance, situational comedy, mime and sometimes sleaze, popularly associated with those in Pattaya and Phuket, Thailand. Leona seizes the term and its imagery, and presents a story of change and struggle. These observations would have gone unnoticed in a radical separatist feminist project (like that of Janice Raymond's) that would be more preoccupied with conceiving Leona as a subject constituted in patriarchy and reproducing the discourses of hegemonic gender stereotypes.

With the theorisation of transgender people as (agent-less) subjects constituted in dimorphic binarist discourse, we risk trivialising and omitting the various initiatives and attempts by transgender people to foster self-help and a

sense of community. The formation of SgButterfly, an online portal for the transgendered community, in 2005, indicates a growing sense of community among the transgender Singaporeans. This is also in tandem with queer women's group Sayoni recognising and accepting transgendered women, and the formation of the Singapore Queer-Straight Alliance which champions equality regardless of gender identity and sexuality. The second yearly event LGBT-affirming Pink Dot, unlike the first, also included a transgendered flag-bearer and spokesperson. These are examples of initiatives and movements aimed at securing LGBT emancipation that cannot be ignored.

At the textual level, the SgButterfly website, with its red, pink and purple motif punctuated by designs of butterflies and flowers, provides fodder for the theorisation of transgender people as merely replicating constructs stereotypically associated with femininity. Conversely, I argue again – in the same vein as Stone and Butler – that this “replication” is a reconfiguration of the symbols of the cultural order, which serves to attract transgender Singaporeans who identify with such symbols. The goal is achieved and the website has over 2,400 registered users sharing their stories and giving advice to one another. The reproduction of stereotypical feminine symbols and narratives is an actual site for transgender community formation, necessary for their empowerment and liberation.

At the same time, this reproduction reflects the realities faced by transgender Singaporeans. It is a reality – and transgender activists here admit it themselves – that the banner of transgender rights is carried by those who are able and quick to mobilise. In this case, male-to-female transsexual Singaporeans are

the ones more involved. Born male and raised to be socialised as boys-to-men, male-to-female transsexuals regularly find themselves in positions of conflict and confrontation, such as being teased and bullied in school, the army and their own families. The relatively greater visibility and presence of male-to-female transsexuals in championing transgender rights and awareness in Singapore, represent their negotiation with a socialisation informed by essentialist notions of gender and sex.

In the middle of an August 2009 forum discussion of transman visibility and advocacy, one transwoman lent her explanation as to why transmen continue to suffer and are unable to organise themselves. She reasoned that transmen were once female, and girls and women are not vocal enough to stamp their authority and fight for themselves. She argued that girls are not expected to be confrontational and are raised not to speak up. On the surface, this screams essentialism. However, there is a fine line between the view that transgender people are supporting and reproducing essentialist ideas of sex and gender, and that of the realisation that transgender people are subjected to hegemonic socialisation but are able to communicate, be understood and mobilise within such a framework. The earlier gendered socialisation faced by male-to-female transsexual Singaporeans has become a means for their emancipation. It figures as an intimate yet integral part to a transwoman's history and character. The view that transwomen merely support heteronormative binarism disregards and erases the history of socialisation.

The differential gendered socialisations faced by transmen and transwomen, inform the formation and politics of the transgender community in Singapore. Conversely, the organisation of various transgender communities and the nature of transgender politics are indicative of gendered socialisations transgender Singaporeans face in their youth. While transwomen might have had their penchant for dolls and dresses, they were at the same time subjected to authoritative and peer socialisations of all things male and masculine. At the same time, transmen were subjected to being brought up as girls and expected to embody female cultural stereotypes such as patience and diplomacy. The masculine socialisation of transwomen may have been oppressive and exacerbated their dissonance, but transwomen's intimate familiarity with male stereotypes through these socialisations have allowed them to critique and subvert the very structures that underpin them. This is not in any way referring to Janice Raymond's idea of "male energy" in the essentialist sense, but to a reconfiguration of stereotypical masculine traits on female bodies to challenge the essentialist order. We are presented with a Foucauldian scenario in which the potential for transgender empowerment may be located within an order that is oppressive in nature to most transgender people. Unfortunately, the fact that transmen pale in numbers and in resolve in community-bonding, activism and seeking surgery/change, reflects the realities of gendered socialisation that have dealt to a fair portion of them life sentences in the closet.

The study of lived realities and histories of transgender people plays a key role in conceptualising transgender agency. It requires an interdisciplinary approach that allows for sociological interrogation as well as textual and discourse

analysis, with the transgender subject at the centre of scholarly inquiry. Disciplinarity and political persuasion are problematic, as seen in Raymond and Hausman's works, as they provide particular frame(work)s through which transgender may be conceived. As a result, particular transgender lived realities are omitted as transgender people are theorised as villains and victims.

The differential (degrees of) conceptualisations of transgender agency will remain a fundamental problem in the representation of transgender in transgender studies. The battle of claims of *true subjectivity* or *authenticity* should however not take centre stage in transgender representation, but should be supported by the investigation of the social, political and (personal) historical dimensions of transgender. The social and political environmental constraints directly faced by transgender people, presents researchers with articulations of transgender identity. These articulations should be analysed in tandem with the nature, politics and developments of these particular constraints. The next section shall address this in detail.

4.4 The Interrogation of Context

As mentioned in the previous sections, there are contextual constraints that affect the transgender articulation. I shall address two constraints: The constraints faced by researchers in doing transgender theory; and the constraints faced by transgender people when articulating themselves. With regards to the latter, I refer specifically to environmental constraints, the cultural and political domains transgender people inhabit, whose codes and cues are also adhered to.

In the first type of constraint, researchers – apart from having to interrogate their research motivations, and predispositions and frameworks for interpreting their transgender subjects – are faced with challenges within the academy. I cite one particular and extreme case in which the gender variant are deprived of a stake in their own study. Markisha Greaney, who identifies as “a white, male-to-female transgendered dyke” and “male lesbian”, gives a damning account of her multiple rejections to pursue graduate studies despite her interest in studying and developing transgender theory.¹³³ In her account, she did not get any support from her professors for their writing letters of recommendations. She claimed professors thought her work, though interesting, would not be accepted and endorsed in the academy and any prestigious graduate programme. Greaney identifies the current problem with transgender theory, with it lacking an “institutional footing” in the academy. After inquiring the reasons for her rejection, she was told by a professor with whom she looked forward to working, that

¹³³ Markisha Greaney, “A Proposal for Doing Transgender Theory in the Academy.” in *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Kate More & Stephen Whittle (New York: Cassell, 1999), 159-170.

“... my rejection was ‘purely political’, and that it had nothing to do with my abilities or potential... (the professor) explained that her department was too conservative despite her presence there, and that my proposal was too scary, radical and ‘trendy’ for her colleagues. All she could suggest was to make my proposal more conventional, and to keep searching for a sympathetic faculty member elsewhere.”¹³⁴

Greaney explained the implications of her rejection from the academy, best encapsulated in a question: Who gets to do theory? The challenges to doing transgender theory are captured in the relationship between cisgendered and transgendered scholars. The observation that the pioneers of transgender theory are non-transgendered obscures the reality of privileges possessed and impediments encountered by various scholars in the academy. Greaney’s experience reminds us that while new insights and critical questions are continually sought in the field, transgender scholars face social prejudices and institutional discrimination that ultimately hinder their contributions to transgender theory. As with the prior – and to some extent, contemporary – white male/female stranglehold on the nature of critical theory and discourse, the seemingly insurmountable barriers to entry into the field by *members/subjects* of the field have long been erected. Greaney’s case may be unique and unfortunate, but it serves as a salient reminder of the challenges transgender research faces.

In the course of my research for this thesis, the University requires researchers who engage human subjects for data collection (interviews, surveys and tests) to submit their research to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to

¹³⁴ Greaney, *A Proposal for Doing Transgender Theory in the Academy*, 167.

ensure an ethical protocol to research. I had listed transgendered persons as potential interview subjects and the secretary who vetted my protocol felt transgender people belonged to an at-risk group, together with minors and elderly citizens. This thus warranted an “expedited review”, a process that views the research to be of greater ethical implications than an exemption, but less than that of a “full review” which would involve the inquiry by a panel. A “full review” would normally be demanded for research involved the extraction of blood, as well as research that involved human testing – biologically, medically or psychologically. By convention, research proposals involving the interviews of adult non-criminals, non-HIV positive persons would be given an exemption by the IRB.

I recall a similar experience late 2007 with the IRB when applying for approval for my Honours year research on sexual minority representation in the print media. The research involved interviews with LGBT-identified individuals, and there were interview questions concerning their views on media representation and the government. The secretary vetting my protocol felt that my research warranted a “full review” as LGBT people in Singapore were deemed an at-risk group. Furthermore, I had been asked to remove the interview questions that asked for views on newspaper editors and government officials whose portfolios concerned media policy and regulation. The secretary at the IRB told me my research was considerably risky “according to the reasonable man on the street”.

I argue in the case of Singapore, what transgender people want are representation and participation. They want to be respectfully portrayed as ordinary hard-working people with professional lives and pay their taxes. This is opposed to the previous portrayals of transgender people as performers in the entertainment industry, dancers in night clubs and prostitutes in Changi. Up till journalist's Wong Kim Hoh's series of reports on transgender Singaporeans in 2008,¹³⁵ transgenderism and transsexuality have mostly either been featured in soft news or in medical pull-outs.

The decisions made by the IRB personnel appear to be premised on the belief that transgender Singaporeans are dangers to themselves and incapable of protecting themselves, hence requiring the protection of university ethics review boards – no less paternalistic. In categorising LGBT Singaporeans as an at-risk group, in the same vein as minors, elder citizens, criminals/prisoners and HIV-positive persons, the IRB demands for stricter protocols on research and becomes more interventionist, such as censoring specific interview questions. With more ethical research protocols demanded, as well as the lengthened duration of the application and reviews, there exist greater impediments to research on transgender in Singapore.

The second type of contextual constraint in transgender representation is the set of environmental impediments and challenges confronted by transgender people on a daily basis, which greatly influence their articulations of self. This is an important and relevant consideration when researchers aim to interpret

¹³⁵ Wong Kim Hoh, "When Papa became Mama." *The Straits Times*, September 8, 2008.

transgender people's interpretation of their environment and world, and the cultural and political constraints that shape their interpretations. Without this consideration, we are faced with accusations of transgender people as the enforcers of patriarchal myths and hegemonic constructions of gender identity, or simply robot replications of prevailing constructs. Furthermore, Stephen Whittle also points out the transgender people are "hampered by social and legal restrictions which have made it very difficult to come out publicly as transgendered."¹³⁶ Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker and Whittle, among others, have long expressed their anger at – and disagreement with – at Janice Raymond and Bernice Hausman, for their lack of consideration of the lived realities of transgender people, hence their alleged transphobic statements depicting transgender people as willing participants of patriarchal hegemony. Raymond conceives of transsexuals as subjects constituted in patriarchal medico-psychiatric discourse, as agent-less minions serving to preserve male domination. For Hausman, transsexuals are willing participants in the "game" of Gender, reproduce binarism. As aforementioned, there exist material and textual constraints that limit transgender articulation, that the perceived "willingness" of transsexuals, for instance, is the result of coercion owing to environmental constraints. These conditions have to be thoroughly investigated.

¹³⁶ Stephen Whittle, "Gender Fucking or Fucking Gender? Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending." in *Blending Genders: Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*, edited by Richard Ekins & Dave King (New York: Routledge, 1996), 207.

4.4.1 From Textual to Contextual

It is at this point I refer to Jay Prosser. In his dense and esoteric book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, female-to-male transsexual Prosser discusses *Gender Trouble*, in particular Butler's use of Latina transsexual Venus Xtravaganza (in the documentary *Paris is Burning*) as "the promise of queer subversion" and her death as a key demonstration of Butler's argument of drag as ambivalent and possibly transgressive.¹³⁷ Prosser argues that "Butler's essay locates transgressive value in that which makes the subject's real life most unsafe."¹³⁸ This, according to Prosser, fails to take into account how the transsexual bodies are embodied and how they inhabit the contexts from which they are excavated for theoretical analyses. Furthermore, Prosser distances himself from Butler's view that transgender people are by definition, queer, as are gays and lesbians because they *trouble* and disrupt the gendered norms of heterosexuality. He says that not all who are transsexed seek to be queer, but rather aim to *straighten* the relationship between sex and gender, an alignment that does not pose any *trouble*.

For Prosser, context is essential to the theorisation of transgender – and its absence or lack of consideration is its pitfall. He distinguishes the difference and tensions between the alignment of self and body, and the alignment of body and discourse. It is in poststructuralism, ironically an approach employed by Prosser himself, that obscures the narrative and importance of the alignment of self and body, prioritising theories and discourses once derived from empirical

¹³⁷ Jay Prosser, "Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex." in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 274.

¹³⁸ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 49.

observation, and ultimately muzzling the voices of the primary stakeholders.

Holly Devor locates the crux of Prosser's argument, saying his book serves to:

remind feminist and queer theorists that words and cultural representations may have tremendous power in our lives, but people live in real bodies made of substantial flesh, and those bodies routinely carry more weight in people's perceptions of themselves and others than do words, texts, or abstract discourses.¹³⁹

Through Prosser and Namaste (who argued for transgender centrality two sections ago), we learn not to be overzealous in our transgender reading into Butler's *Gender Trouble*. Even Butler herself is bemused given she had only devoted "probably no more than five paragraphs to drag",¹⁴⁰ yet her text was subjected to what Prosser would describe as over-reading, playful exaggeration and mischievous additions of emphases.

Aside from being wary of the risks of further canonising the transgender spectrum, the texts of Namaste, and to some extent Prosser, remind us of the dangers of reading too deeply into transgender experiences and subsequently neglecting the experiences themselves. Poststructuralism may provide the many critical lenses through which we may appreciate transgender and locate it along the axes of oppression, but it draws our attention towards (gendered) power relations, and away from the actual lived transgender experiences and embodiments that are confined by the realities of abuse, discrimination and

¹³⁹ Holly Devor, "Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality – Review." *Journal of Sex Research*, May (1999), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2372/is_2_36/ai_54882523/

¹⁴⁰ Judith Butler, "Critically Queer." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1993): 24.

oppression. For Namaste, a return to sociological inquiry into the realities and constraints that confront transgender people is the more helpful solution.

Prosser and Namaste are critical of the preoccupation with textuality and semiotics of transgender's great radical potential, at the expense of critically situating transgender in its oppressive milieu. Their warnings move in tandem with Stone and Stryker's calls for diversity in transgender narratives, given the different emphasis each transgender story places on passing, embodiment, transgenering, etc.

The call for diversity and transgender (scholar) participation in transgender studies is a reaction to what Stone and Stryker see as gross misrepresentations of transgender people. Amidst the textual violence, scholars like Jacob Hale are concerned with the denial of transgender subjectivity, specifically in reference to myriad of trivialised, generalised, tokenised, villainised and victimised transgender portrayals at the hands of different disciplinary approaches such as sociological inquiry and textual analysis. The call for transgender participation indicates the demand for the restoration of centrality of the transgender person/subject to the field of transgender studies. At the same time, the task of centralising the transgender subject is complicated by the extent to which transgender agency and subjectivity are conceived (sociologically or poststructurally), and the different approaches to interrogating the context in which transgender articulations are made (sociological or textual interrogation). The next section will look at these key issues in doing transgender theory that affect transgender representation.

4.4.2 Sexualities in Social Realities

As with the “Charmed Circle” of sexuality conceived by Gayle Rubin,¹⁴¹ transgender people find themselves stratified into hierarchies of social acceptance and privilege, which is reflective of the “values” of society. Across different domains, certain transgenderal identities and manifestations are deemed more acceptable or tolerable. Thus, the claims to transgender subjectivity are not made in a vacuum. When Stone and Stryker made the call for transgender people to speak up, it was not mainly about the demand for more *authentic* transgender voices to stake a claim in transgender discourse, but also the articulation of respective transgendered identities and realities with which their subjectivities confront, are in conflict and are constrained. Transgender articulations are made in environments mostly lacking the understanding to accommodate the gender-queer; they are made in a cisnormative/centred world, and are thus faced with the limitations, challenges and repercussions of such environments.

Stone’s call for transgender people to “read themselves aloud”, and come out, may allow for the visibility and potential recognition of transgender diversity. However, in the case of Singapore, there exist familial, social, political and professional repercussions for coming out. As regularly debated in the Singaporean LGBT community, activists have demanded that coming out is necessary to forward sexual minority rights, because the campaign for LGBT rights cannot be sustained by anonymity and the lack of critical mass. On the other hand, others in the community have shared accounts of being harassed, kicked out of their homes, physical and emotional abuse by elder relatives, and loss of jobs

¹⁴¹ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carole Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), 267-293.

and job opportunities – more reasons for staying silently in the closet. Janice, a Singaporean transwoman and activist, recounts making about a hundred job applications, but was only called for three interviews, and she was not spared questions on her male past.¹⁴² Leona Lo also shares her experience of being harassed by her peers during her time as an army enlistee. Coming out may be an integral step in forwarding LGBT rights, but in doing so, LGBT Singaporeans face further discrimination and abuse. The reading of one's queer-ness is hampered by the homophobia and transphobia that inhabit the same space.

Within the LGBT community, transgender people are also equally constrained in their articulations of self. At a forum involving transmen in August 2009,¹⁴³ a pre-operative female-to-male transsexual panellist, M, identifies himself as a former lesbian. While he now identifies as a heterosexual man, he remains supportive of the queer cause and advocacy. The invocation of sexuality to articulate his identity is most intriguing, considering the context in which the articulation has taken place. In such an event attended mostly by homosexual and bisexual persons (as opposed to the gender-queer), the transmen forum panellists have reprioritised the pronouncement of their gender identity to accommodate the explanation of their sexual orientation. They read themselves in a way others can attempt to best understand or empathise with them.

Cross-dressing in Singapore is also largely confined to specific contexts. For instance, in night entertainment, famous drag queen stand-up comedian

¹⁴² Janice shared her account at a forum on transmen and the transgendered community in August 2009.

¹⁴³ The forum is part of the Singaporean LGBT pride month of Indignation, in which a series of talks, forums, performances and games are organised to keep the LGBT community informed and united.

Kumar is renowned for his cross-dressing as he is for his comedy. In his performances at the Boom Boom Room and 3 Monkeys, he wears dresses on his slender frame as he mimes and dances to music with predominantly female vocals. After each dance segment would be a stand-up comic routine. He sees cross-dressing as a means to gain attention and at the same time, not to be taken seriously when jokes are made. Being ethnic Indian and cross-dressing allow him to get away with politically incorrect jokes on race and gender.

I refer to Viviane Namaste's contextualisation of drag discussed earlier in the thesis where Kumar the comedian is concerned. While at the semiotic level gender is effectively imitated and the known cultural cues of femininity embodied on Kumar's body, his is a performance before a paying audience within a private premise. Drag and cross-dressing in public is largely frowned upon in Singapore. In 2008, the Singaporean police issued a set of rules and regulations for the public *Getai* performances during Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, with a note that transvestite performances are banned. This appeared to be a step backwards from the 1990s, when comedian Jack Neo portrayed the ageing woman Liang Po Po and the middle-aged heartland aunty Liang Si Mei on primetime national television. Still, cross-dressing remains largely taboo and only acceptable if trivialised, associated with humour or border-line insanity on the part of the cross-dresser, explained as a fetish, and within private exclusive domains of night entertainment. So long as this moral order prevails, nowhere is cross-dressing in Singapore seen as a site for counter-discursive movements against hegemonic gender or any itinerary under the "Great Transgender Promise".

In the domain of LGBT activism, many queer activists in Singapore use transsexual and transgender interchangeably. As with LGBT movements in the West, Singaporean activists feel *transgender* is less confrontational, jarring and offensive than *transsexual* given of presence of “sex” in the latter word. At the same time, *transgender* is seen as an umbrella term that comprises not only transsexuals, but cross-dressers, fetishistic and not, hence its common usage.

Leona Lo often describes herself as a “transgender woman”, an interesting oxymoron of conflicting and almost antithetical identities – given that “woman” is a binary gendered category and “transgender” presents its subversion. In identifying herself that way, she makes herself accessible to those within and outside the queer community. The “transgender” represents her queer membership, and “woman” represents her integration and stake in wider cisgendered/sexed society. Through Leona, we are presented with the harmonisation of politically heterogeneous categories, with a view to (co)existence in the Singaporean socio-political milieu.

Still, the Singaporean LGBT community is largely concerned with sexuality-related issues, and not gender identity. This is not helped by the transgender community being relatively isolated and closed, despite the creation of SgButterfly and more transgender inclusion in LGBT events. However, I believe transgender role models like Leona Lo are in a better position to advocate queer rights, although in a limited capacity. Leona passes as a tall, slim, confident and articulate woman. She is privileged with higher educational qualifications and currently works in the public relations line. She has also written an autobiography

and staged a play documenting her life, both serving to raise awareness on the social and emotional issues in transsexuality. Her heterosexuality completes her story of struggle for acceptance and integration into (a binary) society.

As Stone has suggested, and what Raymond and Hausman have neglected, passing is integral to a transgender person's life. The reward for successful passing is the freedom from harassment and discrimination, a privilege taken for granted by the cisgendered/sexed. Pre-, post- and non-operative transsexual Singaporeans are in various stages of feminisation and masculinisation, and passing is integral to their social, emotional and professional well-being. It would be presumptuous to read them as willingly and readily reproducing cultural stereotypes of gender when the heart of the issue is their want for integration and freedom from harassment in a cultural domain which insists on heterocentric dimorphic binarism. Moreover, they navigate a cultural terrain of transgender stereotypes of "tranny" prostitution and perverted cross-dressers, who are "sick" and/or "confused".

In May 2010, three transwomen initiated a campaign "Sisters in Solidarity" to end transgender discrimination in Singapore. The tipping point was when one of them, Marla Bendini Junior Ong, was refused entry into the night club China One. She was told by the manager and bouncer that she was transgendered, would scare their clients and that it was "not their thing".¹⁴⁴ Leona Lo endorses the "Sisters in Solidarity" campaign and shares a similar experience

¹⁴⁴ "This is simply not their "THING"... too". SgButterfly. May 7, 2010. <http://www.sgbutterfly.org/blog/this-is-simply-not-their-thing-too/>.

at being thrown out of a night club and humiliatingly called a “ladyboy”.¹⁴⁵ The campaign faces an uphill battle as it fights the practices of transgender discrimination in an environment steeped in stereotypes. The clubs’ explanations for Marla and Leona’s refusal of entry is indicative of the prevailing stereotype that transwomen are mostly either sleazy performers or prostitutes in search of clients.

As it is, the self-perpetuating cycle of stereotypes and discrimination have deprived transwomen of work and forced some of them into prostitution. It is the self-reinforcing attitude of transgender discrimination that plays a role in coercing these women into transsexual prostitution, in turn legitimising the belief that transwomen are mostly sex workers and should be kept out of sight. One transwoman, A, held several odd jobs and had to resort to prostitution to earn her keep. Her story is also shared by other cash-strapped transwomen who have to enter the sex trade in Changi Village,¹⁴⁶ a hotspot for transsexual prostitution for a few decades now, other than Desker Road.

The reality that Singapore is multicultural does not help alleviate transphobia, but exacerbates it. Chinese terms like “ah kua” and Malay terms “bapok” and “pondan” travel freely across socio-cultural boundaries and are readily used to insult transgender people as well as effeminate men in Singapore. Stone’s suggestion of “reading oneself aloud” is not without repercussions, and only a select few are in a better position to do so. I refer again to the likes of

¹⁴⁵Sylvia Tan. “Transgender women in Singapore launch campaign to end discrimination.” *Fridae*. May 5, 2010. <http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/printable.php?articleid=9898>.

¹⁴⁶ *Uncensored: The Shocking Truth Behind the Life Stories of Transsexuals*, DVD, produced by Sujimy Mohd & Haslinda Ali (Singapore: Screenbox, 2009).

Leona Lo as well as Marla Bendini, both of whom have university education, confidently pass as women, and present themselves as transgender and queer role models. Their presence disrupts the prevailing Singaporean discourse on transgender, but at the same time arrives with limitations, for in the case of Leona, heteronormativity is reiterated and emphasised as she publicly articulates her womanhood.

The calls for transgender participation and articulation by Stone and Stryker, have also been echoed by Kate Bornstein, who believes the gender-queer have the power to decide who they are and who they want to be.¹⁴⁷ This is where ethnocentric approaches to transgender discourse and theory, if uncritically heeded, are in danger of undermining transgender liberation in Singapore. This thesis has shown that transgender articulations are not made in a vacuum, but in domains characterised by heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia and the natural emphasis on binarism. As with public affirmation and support for gay rights, transgender Singaporeans face possible backlash for being themselves and “reading themselves aloud”. In a potpourri of fear, lack of information, guilt, hatred, antipathy and apathy, we are largely confined to a handful of opinion leaders and role models to forward the cause for queer and transgender liberation.

There lie many contextual constraints to transgender articulation as I have explored. They are constrained by legal norms, professional circumstances, social norms and stereotypes, prevailing institutional and commercial discrimination, the cues and codes within the wider LGBT community, among others. They limit as

¹⁴⁷ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

well as underpin how transgender Singaporeans negotiate with and/or are coerced into particular transgender articulations. These are the items that are in need of further investigation. Their investigation would eventually come to guide or supplement scholarly interpretations and theorisations of transgender. We should go beyond the mere interpretation of transgender articulation and their sense-making of the world, but also evaluate the conditions that influence and constrain both the observer and the transgender subject.

5.0 Conclusion

This thesis has shown that transgender (mis)representations are shaped by a composite of factors. The preoccupation – the Great Transgender Promise – with the radical theoretical potential of transgender studies displaces transgender from the centre of the study, and I have shown how various scholars have used transgender studies as a means to pursue other theoretical projects. I have also argued for the restoration of centrality to the transgender subject in transgender studies, before the pursuit of other theoretical projects.

The conceptualisation of transgender agency is another factor influencing its portrayal. An inquiry into the personal histories of transgender persons as well as the emerging socio-political movements is necessary for a more holistic conceptualisation of transgender agency. Transgender people cannot be simply dismissed as villains or victims of patriarchy and binarism. Their apparent reiterations and reproductions of patriarchal medico-moral discourses that emphasise dimorphic binarism, can be read as reconfigurations of an oppressive order. I also argue that it is through the observations of perceived reproductions of discourses of hegemonic gender, that we are able to locate sites for negotiation, critique, subversion and empowerment.

Still, the study of transgender is largely problematic and contingent on the political, theoretical and methodological leanings of the scholar. I believe the study and theorisation of transgender should be guided by the interrogation of contextual constraints to studying transgender. I refer to the interrogation of the

environments in which transgender people read/present themselves and are at the same concerned about them being read/interpreted by (non-transgender) others.

While I may share their disagreements with Janice Raymond and Bernice Hausman, I believe the theoretical and political proposals of Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, Stephen Whittle and Kate Bornstein are largely constrained by the cultural and political realities in Singapore. In their criticism of sociology with a hidden agenda (i.e. Raymond's maintenance of borders between natural women and men, or Hausman's invalidation of authentic transsexual identities), they have asked for greater transgender participation, with a view to come out and share with the world – and also stake a claim in – gender diversity. Through Viviane Namaste and Jay Prosser, we find ourselves returning to the sociological investigation of the constraints faced by transgender people and their scholarly observers. There are historical, social, emotional, cultural and political circumstances that shape and impede transgender articulations and their readings. At the same time, this has to be balanced with a textual approach to teasing out the discursive boundaries that shape these aforementioned circumstances.

This thesis has shown the impact of theory on the representation of transgender, and how through certain (mis)representations, transgender people are resultantly marginalised and remain so. Theory should be context-sensitive, actionable and oriented towards improving the lives of those we seek to represent and theorise. Namaste lists the challenges for scholars to confront:

- 1. The work of scholars needs to adequately describe how the individuals under investigation are situated in the world, as well as how they make sense of this location.*

2. *Such theory needs to move beyond a mere description of a particular population, to a critical examination of how the life experiences of these people are shaped and ordered through specific social, cultural, economic and historical relations.*
3. *Theory needs to be explicitly linked to social practice, as the elements of a theory that focus on the transformation of social relations are constituted in and through the world as it is actually organised.*¹⁴⁸

Namaste states, citing Brian Fay, that the articulation of theory plays a pivotal role in improving people's daily lives. She refers to Fay and his list of five basic requirements for critical social theory, which have inspired my position and some of my arguments in this thesis:¹⁴⁹

1. *A reflexivity in which subjects are aware of and understand their dissatisfactions and contradictions in the social world.*
2. *An ideology-critique that exposes the illusory nature of our beliefs and how they preserve the status quo.*
3. *Theory that analyses specific social changes.*
4. *These changes are examined in relation to the real needs of the people implicated in them.*
5. *Transforming critical social theory into social practice, involving active participation of social actors.*¹⁵⁰

A recurrent contention in transgender studies is researcher subjectivity. Jacob Hale has outlined the need for a thorough self-interrogation on the part of the researcher, the evaluation of non-trans power/privileges and a focus on how the study of transgender informs the researcher about himself/herself (and not

¹⁴⁸ Namaste, *Invisible Lives*, 28.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵⁰ Brian Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975), 92-111.

about transgender people).¹⁵¹ This thesis is a process of self-interrogation as it makes salient transgender oppression, evaluates the structures, discourses and frameworks that underpin and promulgate transphobia, but I believe most importantly, assess the relevance of key arguments and concepts in the Singaporean context, and proposes an approach to transgender studies with a view to transgender liberation.

Hale's set of rules is indicative of the belief that authority in transgender studies should belong to transgender people themselves. This is but a reaction to non-transgender domination in the field of transgender study, which has brought about transphobia and omission of the transgender voice. I have no intention to stake any claim to authority in transgender theory, as the purpose of this thesis is to reflect on and evaluate the grounds for transgender misrepresentation, and outline a set of considerations for a more responsible study and portrayal of the Singaporean transgender, with a view to transgender liberation.

While we are only able to identify transgender misrepresentations by their implications and the violence they do to transgender people, I believe with diligence, sensitivity and a sense of responsibility, and in view of the items I have discussed, we would be in a better position to steer away from misrepresentation. It is with diligence that we explore not only the theoretical implications of our observations of transgender but also interrogate the positions of ourselves as researchers and transgender people as our research subjects. It is with sensitivity that we restore centrality to the transgender subject and relate how their histories

¹⁵¹ Jacob Hale, *Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans* ____.

and personhood interact with cis/heteronormative world. Research on transgender should also be governed by a sense of responsibility. This is best summed up by Hale, alluding to Hausman, warning against the usage of “those with less power within institutionalized, material and discursive structures as your meal ticket (retention, tenure, promotion)”. At the same, researchers should have a responsibility to their subjects, and refrain from prioritising other theoretical projects and political agenda, such as the Great Transgender Promise, ahead of transgender people, or using transgender people as a conduit for their other non-transgender-related theoretical pursuits. In view of Hale’s warning, I propose that the privileges that accompany the non-transgender scholar should be transferred to transgender subject of study, and oriented towards transgender liberation.

These conditions for doing transgender research are also the same conditions necessary for transgender liberation in Singapore, whether initiated by non-transgender people, transgender people, or persons part of the LGBT civil rights movement. What are sought are not only the articulations that present subversion and radical theoretical challenges to the structures, orders and logics that characterise transgender oppression, but also how the location of sites for transgender empowerment and emancipation will help address and influence changes in the attitudes and treatments of transgender people – a goal achievable with the centralisation of transgender in the project/research. We should locate the impediments that prevent transgender Singaporeans from being and articulating what they are and who they are, without the fears of discrimination and persecution, to live as free as other human beings and citizens in the land.

Stone's proposal of "reading oneself aloud" not only applies to the transgender margins, but also to those supportive of their emancipation. Those who have the privilege of education, access to information, and/or reputation as opinion and community leaders, should also read themselves aloud, not for the sake of looking for *trouble* and causing disruption to dominant discourses, but to pave the way and create safe and conducive environments for transgender people to emerge from the margins to articulate themselves. The fight for transgender liberation cannot rest only on transgender shoulders, but requires both the efforts of transgender and non-transgender peoples. This presents itself as an adaptation of the Aristophanes creation myth, wherein this proposed alliance will be sturdy enough to challenge the oppressive discourses that have long robbed transgender people of their freedoms. I am of the hope that this will lead to a concerted effort to confront the conditions that spawn and exacerbate transgender misrepresentations and mobilise them for transgender liberation.

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7.0 Annex A: Jacob Hale's Suggested Rules.

Obtained from <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>

Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans _____.

1. Approach your topic with a sense of humility: you are not the experts about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans _____. Transsexuals are.

2. Interrogate your own subject position: the ways in which you have power that we don't (including powers of access, juridical power, institutional power, material power, power of intelligible subjectivity), the ways in which this affects what you see and what you say, what your interests and stakes are in forming your initial interest, and what your interests and stakes are in what you see and say as you continue your work. (Here's what Bernie Hausman, p.vii, says about how her initial interest was formed: She had been reading about transvestism and ran across library material on transsexualism. "Now *that* was fascinating." Why? "The possibilities for understanding the construction of 'gender' through an analysis of transsexualism seemed enormous and there wasn't a lot of critical material out there." Remember that using those with less power within institutionalized, material and discursive structures as your meal ticket (retention, tenure, promotion) is objectionable to those so used.)

3. Beware of replicating the following discursive movement (which Sandy Stone articulates in "The Empire Strikes Back," and reminds us is familiar from other colonial discourses): Initial fascination with the exotic; denial of subjectivity, lack of access to dominant discourse; followed by a species of rehabilitation.

4. Don't erase our voices by ignoring what we say and write, through gross misrepresentation (as Hausman does to Sandy Stone and to Kate Bornstein), by denying us our academic credentials if we have them (as Hausman does to Sandy Stone), or by insisting that we must have academic credentials if we are to be taken seriously.

5. Be aware that our words are very often part of conversations we're having within our communities, and that we may be participating in overlapping conversations within multiple communities, e.g., our trans communities, our scholarly communities (both interdisciplinary ones and those that are disciplinarily bounded), feminist communities, queer communities, communities of color. Be aware of these conversations, our places within them, and our places within community and power structures. Otherwise, you won't understand our words.

6. Don't totalize us, don't represent us or our discourses as monolithic or univocal; look carefully at each use of 'the', and at plurals.

7. Don't uncritically quote non-transsexual "experts," e.g., Harry Benjamin, Robert Stoller, Leslie Lothstein, Janice Raymond, Virginia Prince, Marjorie Garber. Apply the same critical acumen to their writings as you would to anyone else.

8. Start with the following as, minimally, a working hypothesis that you would be loathe to abandon: "Transsexual lives are lived, hence livable" (as Naomi Scheman put it in "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer").

9. When you're talking about male-to-female transsexual discourses, phenomena, experiences, lives, subjectivities, embodiments, etc., make that explicit and keep making it explicit throughout; stating it once or twice is not sufficient to undermine paradigmaticity. Don't toss in occasional references to female-to-male transsexual discourses, phenomena, experiences, lives, subjectivities, embodiments, etc., without asking what purposes those references serve you and whether or not those purposes are legitimate.

10. Be aware that if you judge us with reference to your political agenda (or agendas) taken as the measure or standard, especially without even asking if your agenda(s) might conflict with ours and might not automatically take precedence over ours, that it's equally legitimate (or illegitimate, as the case may be) for us to use our political agenda(s) as measures by which to judge you and your work.

11. Focus on: What does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or transsexual _____ tell you about *yourself*, *not* what does it tell you about trans.

12. Ask yourself if you can travel in our trans worlds. If not, you probably don't get what we're talking about. Remember that we live most of our lives in non-transsexual worlds, so we probably do get what you're talking about.

13. Don't imagine that you can write about the trope of transsexuality, the figure of the transsexual, transsexual discourse/s, or transsexual subject positions without writing about transsexual subjectivities, lives, experiences, embodiments. Ask yourself: what relations hold between these categorial constructions, thus what implications hold between what you write about one and what you don't write about another.

14. Don't imagine that there is only one trope of transsexuality, only one figure of "the" transsexual, or only one transsexual discourse at any one temporal and cultural location.

15. If we attend to your work closely enough to engage in angry, detailed criticism, don't take this as a rejection, crankiness, disordered ranting and raving, or the effects of testosterone poisoning. It's a *gift*. (And it's praise: there must be something we value about you to bother to engage you, especially since such engagement is often painful, as well as time-consuming, for us.)