Trans men’s sexual narrative-practices: Introducing STS to trans and sexuality studies

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Abstract
Clinical expectations that trans people will be so filled with self-loathing that sexual interactions will be limited if possible at all fail to take into account the heterogeneous ways trans people experience their own bodies and sexualities. In this essay, I extend recent work in science and technology studies (STS) that attends to material practices by examining the work of narrative and argue for a new paradigm in situating trans sexualities. I analyse trans men’s autobiographical stories to show some of the many ways that trans men make sense of themselves (and enact maleness) as sexual subjects. By focusing on how sex-gender is enacted and hangs together in narrative-practices, we can more fully understand and appreciate the realities of trans lives and the inadequacies of clinical diagnosis.

Keywords
Autobiography, female to male, praxiography, STS, transgender

There has never been a time that I felt more human, more of this flesh, than when I am fucking. […] As complicated bodies touch, we are molded like soft clay into something resembling a form we can be comfortable enough to live in. Sex is the glue that has held my jigsaw body together. Surrendering to the touch of another has brought me back to self; it’s given me back the body I lost to abuse and Dysphoria, it has in fact made me real. (Lowrey, 2011: 96)

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In the story “Made real”, Sassafras Lowrey articulates quite beautifully how ze is “held together” through sexual practices. For Lowrey, sex is a situation within which ze can be recognized and “transformed” (2011: 96). Yet, hir experiences of being comfortable in sexual encounters are contrary to traditional – and clinical – understandings of how trans people relate to their bodies, which presume that a sense of self-loathing, especially genital, precludes experiences of sexual comfort and precedes medical treatment for “gender dysphoria.” In Jason Cromwell’s (1999) anthropological study of trans men and FTMs, one participant, Arthur Freeheart, articulates this problem:

> It seems that having a sex life and/or being able to take pleasure in your own sexual feelings “presurgery” is either seen as a “cure” for gender discomfort or proof that you must not have enough body hate and body repulsion to be transsexual. (p. 131; emphasis added)

The dilemma Freeheart describes has roots in the clinical origin of transexuality: hatred of one’s genitals was the cornerstone of the diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Benjamin, 1999 [1966]; see also Cromwell, 1999: 123–4). The newer category “gender dysphoria” (previously “gender identity disorder”) relies on hatred of, or at least “persistent discomfort” with, one’s body prior to clinical treatment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 451–9). This is important because trans people wishing to acquire medically supervised hormone treatment or surgery in most instances require this diagnosis and the approval of psychiatric “specialists” (see Coleman et al., 2012). Thus, how clinical professionals understand transexuality directly impacts trans people’s access to body modifying interventions and has far-reaching effects. Many scholars report that trans people attempting to access body modifying surgeries or hormones continue to desexualize their experiences of their own bodies (Blanchard, 2010: 370; Serano, 2010: 185) or that an outright omission of an erotic sense of self is still necessary in order to achieve this diagnosis (see Cromwell, 1999: 132; Davy and Steinbock, 2012: 270–5).

In the story “Nick and Mark”, trans man Nick Laird outlines his experience of this tension:

> I even had to lie to doctors to get prescribed testosterone or, at least, I felt that I had to lie because I was scared they would not prescribe testosterone, which I desperately wanted to take. I pretended to want phalloplasty because I knew they could accept I was man without a penis, but they could not accept me as a man who did not want one. I felt I had to want one. (2008: 78–9)

Laird’s disclosure that he had no desire for genital reconstructive surgeries, yet felt it was imperative to fake such a desire to medical professionals supervising his health (and access to medically prescribed testosterone), gives us a picture of how this stereotypical narrative functions for those who do not subscribe to it. For Laird, a gay trans man with a long-term partner, his happy sex life with his
non-surgically-reconstructed genitals does not fit within clinical understandings of transexuality, even though for Laird himself his experience and understanding of transexuality, his body, his sexuality and his maleness do make sense: “I have come to an understanding that my genitals don’t have a gender, they are just genitals, part of my body and, since I am a man, my genitals are part of a man’s body” (Laird, 2008: 78). As Lowrey, Freeheart and Laird convey, the expectation that one will be so filled with self-loathing that sexual interactions will be limited, if possible at all, fails to take into account the many and diverse ways trans people experience their bodies.

In her powerful essay “The Empire strikes back”, Sandy Stone (2006 [1991]) comments on what she calls “the large grey area” of trans people’s “erotic sense of their own bodies” (p. 228) as one problem (among many) in the clinical treatment of trans people. Stone’s essay is described by eminent trans scholars Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle as “the protean text from which contemporary transgender studies emerged” (2006: 221). Yet this tension – between achieving the diagnosis and experiencing bodily pleasures – has remained under-examined even within the recently emerging field of transgender studies. Given that one of the primary concerns of trans studies is to analyze normative assumptions about sex and gender (Stryker, 2006: 3), the relatively scant attention paid to trans people’s sexual practices (and trans men’s in particular) is remarkable.3

Despite the fact that the diagnosis has been somewhat “broadened,” as trans scholars Zowie Davy and Eliza Steinbock note, “The stated ‘correct’ intention to psychiatrists of one’s wish for normative sexual morphology, orientations and gender congruence, are the significant factors in the markers between transexualism and other diagnoses” (2012: 271; original emphasis). 4 What this means is trans people required to be approved for medical interventions by specialists following the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) must articulate a bodily experience that follows this normative congruence logic.

It is my contention that the grey area of trans sexualities persists in large part due to the unsuitability of traditional ways of thinking “the body,” and trans bodies in particular. That is, trans ways of making sense of ourselves disappear under the lens of conventional theoretical approaches to sex-gender, embodiment and clinical understandings of trans lives. Through this essay, I argue that ‘science and technology studies’ (STS) ways of rethinking objects (like bodies) and “reality” as multiple, rather than singular, better allows us to take seriously the necessarily complex ways of being trans. A burgeoning interest in “new materialisms” across fields of study (see, for example, in feminism, Alaimo and Hekman, 2008; public health, Fraser, 2010; education, Lenz Taguchi and Palmer, 2013; medicine, Michael and Rosengarten, 2012; fashion, Parkins, 2008; HIV. Pienaar, 2014; law, Seear and Fraser, 2014; literary studies, Weaver, 2013) has yet to be brought to bear on sexuality studies or trans studies. Using the innovative methods of studying and ways of thinking offered by STS, I argue for a new paradigm in understanding trans lives that undoes clinical logic. I do this by showing some of the many ways trans men make sense of their maleness through what I term “narrative-practices.”5
I focus on trans men’s sexual narrative-practices as a way to argue against the assumed (and enacted) desexualization of trans bodies and to show the fruitful possibilities of engaging STS methods in studies of sexuality.

**Introducing STS to trans and sexuality studies**

I approach the task of this essay by extending STS scholar Annemarie Mol’s (1999, 2002) work on multiplicity that I read through a shared understanding of reality with Karen Barad’s (2007, 2009) theory of “agential realism.” Put simply, this “onto-epistem-ology” involves a shift from understanding objects (and subjects) as independent, to a focus on the situatedness of phenomena. For Barad, this requires a re-configuring of the language we use to describe relations:

The neologism “intra-action” signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction”, which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. (2007: 33; original emphasis)

In a similar fashion Mol proclaims: “reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices” (1999: 75). This way of thinking multiply is useful to trans and materiality studies as it moves away from a “perspectivist” view of objects and “the body.” As STS researcher Suzanne Fraser explains, Mol extends perspectivalism to suggest that construction is never completed, but always in process:

While constructionism recognizes the “made-ness” of apparently given things such as diseases, it tends to frame the processes of making as singular and terminal. That is, these processes happen once, come to an end and, as a result, we are left with a disease or other object constituted in a certain way: a product of its social and temporal context to be sure, but complete and now immutable in its constructedness. [...] Against this view, Mol argues that, on the contrary, phenomena are always being made and remade. (Fraser, 2010: 233)

Mol’s work, then, undoes perspectivist logic by demonstrating how objects enacted in practice become multiple objects, which may align – and therefore appear singular – or diverge, and thus multiplicity becomes visible. Importantly, multiplicity only becomes apparent if one attends to how phenomena are (intra-actively) enacted in practice. “Enactment” means how things are done. Mol calls this study of enactment praxiography (literally “a study of practices”):

[A]fter the shift from an epistemological to a praxiographic appreciation of reality, telling about what [something] is isn’t quite what it used to be. Somewhere along the way the meaning of the word “is” has changed. Dramatically. This is what the change
implies: the new “is” is one that is situated. It doesn’t say what [something] is by nature, everywhere. It doesn’t say what it is in and of itself, for nothing ever “is” alone. To be is to be related. The new talk about what is does not bracket the practicalities involved in enacting reality. It keeps them present. (Mol, 2002: 53–4; original emphasis)

A praxiographic approach, then, articulates the practical realities of phenomena being studied. Following Mol, I attend to sexual practices as they are articulated in trans men’s narratives: “Since enactments come in the plural the crucial question to ask about them is how they are coordinated” (Mol, 2002: vii–viii). How is maleness materialized through narratives of sexuality and sexual practices? My praxiography of trans men’s sexual narratives elucidates how sex-gender and embodiment are intra-actively materialized in sexual practices.

Towards the end of The Body Multiple, Mol briefly suggests the possibility of complicating further her study of multiplicity through consideration of “interference” with other realities (2002: 142–9; see also Mol, 1999: 81–3). Her example of interference is “sex difference”. Mol does not go so far as to relate sex-gender as another multiple-object enacted in practice. This is not her task. For Mol, “sex difference” is “rather a too overwhelming complexity of the topic” (2002: 144). My task in this essay is to take up this moment and attend to that complexity. Sex-gender, too, is multiple. It cannot be taken for granted as a self-evident truth; rather, sex must also be achieved. Here we might well remember Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of sex (1993), cited by both Mol (2002: 36–42) and Barad (1998: 89–93). Where Butler suggests sex “becomes something like a fiction” (1993: 5–6), here I am taking up exactly how that fiction works. As sex-gender is multiple, it also “hangs together” (Mol, 2002: 5). Following Deleuze and Guattari, STS scholar John Law calls this hanging together “assemblage” (see Law, 2004: 41–2). In this essay, I am investigating how sex-gender assemblage happens in trans men’s sexual narrative-practices. That is, how do trans men assemble their (multiple) sexual practices, pleasures and embodiments to achieve maleness? Looking to the creative ways trans men compose narratives that coordinate their maleness and diverse embodiments can help to rethink transsexual pathology, as well as highlight the many ways we (all) materialize sex-gender.

At this point, the queer, trans and feminist scholars among us may recall the work of philosophy scholar and trans man C. Jacob Hale (2003 [1997]), who articulates in “Leatherdyke boys and their daddies: How to have sex without women or men,” how fluid possibilities for gender can be explored – both theoretically and in practice – through sexual dynamics. Hale describes the enactment of (trans)gender in leather scenes (where relation hinges on sex role rather than anatomy) as highlighting the crucial specificities of recognition and location, as well as the mutability of gender in practice. Hale’s autobiographical story illustrates this onto-epistem-ology of gender:

[W]hen my daddy goes to a women-only play party, probably the first thing she does is pay an admission fee and sign a release form. During this encounter, her operative sex/
gender status is woman, since she must be a woman (however that is defined by the party organizers) to be admitted. Probably the next thing Daddy does is stow her toybag and hang up her leather jacket if it’s a hot night, because Daddy likes to socialize a little and get into a party headspace before playing. During this time, her operative sex/gender status is leatherdyke daddy, for this is the category through which her interactions with others are organized, especially but not only those interactions in which eroticism is present. Once Daddy is in a scene with a butch faggot boy, once Daddy’s dick has become a sensate dick in Daddy’s phenomenological experience of Daddy’s embodiment, Daddy may be simply a very butch gay male leather bear-daddy. Or something else entirely, depending on the specific content of the interactions between Daddy, Daddy’s boy, and any other participants or observers. (2003: 68; original emphasis) 

Hale concludes his essay by emphasizing the situatedness of sex-gender: “Instead of speaking of a person’s gender status, we might do well to speak of a person’s gendered status in a given cultural location, at a given time, and for a given purpose” (2003: 67). Hale also draws attention to the assemblage of multiple sex-gender enactments in specific ways that make sense of sex-gender tensions. For Hale, his experiences of sexual-gender practices in a particular leatherboy/Daddy relationship facilitated his exploration of his gender, which led to his decision to transition from female to male. In his essay Hale points to a number of organizing strategies through which he (and other people in his leather community, and beyond) assemble their sex-gender practices, including what he calls “retooling” or “recoding” (p. 65), which can facilitate “chang[ing] our embodiments without changing our bodies” (p. 66). As he describes:

Sexual interactions, along with public restrooms and medical settings, are some of the sites at which dominant cultural connections between genitals and gender are the tightest, so many people must remap the sexualized zones of our bodies if we are to be sexually active. (Hale, 2003: 65–6)

I pursue this notion of “remapping” further to show that there are a number of organizing strategies trans men use to assemble and enact maleness in sexual practices and relationships. By looking to the stories trans men have written about themselves, I expand Hale’s work by extending STS logic through Jay Prosser’s (1998) “body narratives” and propose that it is not only practices, but practices and narratives working together for trans men (and their partners) materializing maleness. Mol (2002) outlines a number of ways of understanding relations that I engage and extend in this essay, including: mutual exclusion (one thing precludes another), alignment (multiple enactments appear singular), translation (turning one thing into another), addition (enactments are added together to produce coherence), and distribution (potentially conflicting phenomena are kept apart in time or space).
Trans sexual narrative-practices

This essay draws from a larger PhD project investigating trans men’s sense-making in autobiographical accounts, paying particular attention to sexual, clinical and bodily realities. All published book-length autobiographies and edited collections featuring trans men were coded for statements about sexuality, sexual practices, clinical experiences, and feelings about embodiment. What became clear is that most autobiographies and memoir narratives by trans men do not include details of their sexual lives. Although Mario Martino’s (1977) *Emergence* – the first published book-length female to male autobiography – does describe in detail his relationship to, and involvement in, various sex acts throughout his life from childhood to marriage, few others have included this information. Some frame this exclusion as deliberate, like T Cooper (2012) does in his book *Real Man Adventures*:

HER: Hey, are you going to write about sex in your book?
ME: Hey, are you fucking kidding me?
HER: That’s what people always want to know about.
ME: No fucking way.
HER: Just asking … (p. 255)

Cooper’s interlocutor is his wife (Allison Glock-Cooper) and this excerpt implies the labor trans men’s sexual partners also do (see especially Pfeffer, 2010; Ward, 2010; see also, Brown, 2010; Hines, 2006; Sanger, 2010). In a number of ways, trans men’s maleness may be co-produced with, or indeed hinge on, sex partner reciprocation, and this mode of materializing maleness is considered throughout this essay. Significantly, by introducing sex in this way, Cooper simultaneously makes clear that he has a sex life, and that it will not be a part of his book. Cooper’s (and others’) refusal to “write about sex” could be explained by the risks involved in trans men textually (re)producing their sex lives, including a wish to avoid the “genital-curiosity” trans people often experience (see Orchard, 2011: 26; “Oscar” in Vidal-Ortiz, 2002: 207–8). Yet the omission of writing about sex does another kind of work also: intentional or not, it erases the realities of trans people’s sexual pleasures.

tend to be explicitly sexual. This very textual reality – that sexual details are left out of book-length trans autobiographies and sexual stories are published only as snippets collected together and without the rest of the author’s life story – reflects the extent to which stories of transexuality continue to be structured by the absence of sexual-bodily-pleasures and vice versa.

“*I shut my sexuality off and isolated myself*”: *Mutual exclusion*

One way trans men materialize their maleness is through total abstinence from sexual interaction. This is what Mol calls *mutual exclusion*: “These exigencies are incompatible, at least: they cannot be realized simultaneously. [...] It is not a question of looking from different perspectives either. [...] The incompatibility is a practical matter” (Mol, 2002: 35). In his autobiography, *Dear Sir or Madam: The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual*, Mark Rees (1996) describes this practical incompatibility:

> My body was, to me, so repulsive that I didn’t want to see it myself, let alone allow anyone else to do so. I realized that what others took for granted – sexual relationships – would be barred from me. Life thus promised to be one of isolation. (p. 17)

In a more recently published collection of stories by trans people, *Trans People in Love*, a similar experience of embodiment is articulated by FTM Nikolas McDaniel (2008):

> I never dated. Unlike many trans men, I never identified as lesbian. I wasn’t willing to give up who I was. No matter what lies my body told, my heart knew I was a heterosexual man, not a lesbian. Until I was nearly thirty years old I had no terms like “transsexual” to articulate how I felt. Being seen by a potential girlfriend as female was a risk I couldn’t take. Before 2005, I never dated; I shut my sexuality off and isolated myself. (p. 146)

Rees and McDaniel’s experiences of their bodies as repulsive or female precludes sexual interactions with other people (at that time). Enacting maleness is, for them, *mutually exclusive* of sexual practices. That is, sexual interactions and their masculinity “cannot be realized simultaneously”. Like the absence of writing about sex in trans narratives, this “not-doing” is still enacting maleness. Raymond Thompson (1995) also describes his experience in terms of practical incompatibility:

> My sexual experiences were one-sided, and for many years they had to be. While my body was the way it was, there was no way that anyone would be allowed to see or touch the parts of it that didn’t belong to me. I had rejected them myself so long ago, and had learned to close off from my mind the fact that they were there. I never looked at the parts of my body which were wrong – it was hard enough to wash them. The only physical affection that I could be on the receiving end of was being kissed and
held by a woman. I always slept in my underpants, and the women that I became involved with respected this – they had little choice. The older I got, the more I perfected my detachment from my body. My body didn’t exist in the way it was born; for me it only existed in my inner identity as a male. Having a woman touch me sexually would have broken my detachment, which I needed to maintain in order to keep my sanity. (p. 75)

Thompson’s characterization also draws attention to the specificity of time – “While my body was the way it was” – and how his narrative-practices change over time. When Thompson later obtains phalloplasty (the surgical construction of a penis), his sexual landscape changes (see p. 261).

“I wanted to have sex with a guy in my male body”: Alignment

Thompson’s post-surgical recalibration of his sexual narrative-practices depicts one way that mutual exclusion can shift into alignment. When trans men’s anatomy is enacted as female and mutually excludes sexual interactions, the surgical construction of male genitals remakes that narrative (and reality). Indeed, many of the story-tellers in Hung Jury describe their experiences in a way that suggests this. For example, Tone (2012) writes in “Transforming to masculine embodiment”: “Surgery was necessary because it allowed me to feel whole in my body and express myself as a man socially and sexually” (p. 30). Importantly, when a skin-graft from the forearm, abdomen, thigh or back is refashioned and attached at the genital region, the shifting of the flesh constitutes one enactment, but it only becomes a penis through narrative-practices enacting that flesh in new ways. 12

Even if men do not obtain genital reconstructive surgeries, they may still evoke this narrative through waiting. As gay trans man Zed articulates, “I always knew I was gay, but I wanted to have sex with a guy in my male body, not the female body” (in Rose, 2010: 56). This notion of deferral can relate to the changing conditions of possibility in surgical techniques, as Fred in Man Tool explains: “If I could have a penis the exact size and shape that I always dreamed of, and it worked perfectly, the way a regular penis is supposed to [...] then I might have genital surgery. But in the meantime, my pup is home grown and I like it just fine” (in Cameron, 2001). This way of coordinating maleness renders its multiplicity invisible: when enactments align they appear to produce a singular phenomenon, yet they are more than one (see Mol, 2002: vii–5). Fred’s assertion “in the meantime” coordinates his sex-gender across time, anticipating different future possibilities. Genital reconstructive surgeries, however, are only one way of materializing maleness. Martino (1977) makes clear what materializes his sexual maleness: “Any resemblance to lesbianism on our part was due to my lack of the proper organs. Never did I use my vagina during lovemaking – always I attached and wore my false penis” (p. 134). This is an example of another coordinating strategy: translation.
“It’s the same thing, a strap on and a dick, really”: Translation

Regardless of the physical make-up of Martino’s “false penis” or what it was when first acquired (a dildo, a prosthetic, and so), what it is intra-actively to him and his lover is a penis, even if a “false” one. “A male sex organ” materializes as one thing turns into another, both narratively and practically. There are at least two ways trans men use translation in their sexual narrative-practices: 1) like Martino, by incorporating nonhuman objects; and 2) by resignifying anatomy. Much of Hale’s (2003) formulation of sex-gender in “Leatherdyke boys” focuses on these ways of enacting sex-gender:

One such phenomenon is that inanimate objects – dildoes – sometimes take on some of the phenomenological characteristics of erogenous body parts. So, when Powersurge defined a woman as someone who could slam her dick into a drawer without hurting it, a common response among some butch leatherdykes and some ftms was to say that it sure would hurt if their dicks got slammed into a drawer; a dildo may not be a dick only in the conception, it may be a dick phenomenologically as well. (Hale, 2003: 66)

As Hale illustrates, the narrative-practices of trans men’s sexual lives can enact maleness by translating specific phenomena into male materialities. Translations are acts. They rely on both narrative (usually involving particular naming [resignifications]) and practices (usually particular sex-gendered sexual interactions) together. In order to engage in certain sexual practices in ways that affirm their maleness, some trans men enact their sexuality as male using nonhuman objects:

I like getting blowjobs while wearing a strap-on. I like the visual aspect, I like to watch a woman sucking my cock, and it feels like enough of an extension of my body that I get some visceral sensation from it. I don’t like receiving oral on my actual cock/clit so much. (Tommy, in Rose, 2010: 66; emphasis added)

Differently from Martino’s “false penis”, Tommy’s “strap-on” becomes his “cock”: through his sexual interaction and his narrative, his male genitals are enacted as real (as reality). As Hale emphasizes, sexual practices can render one’s dildo indistinct from the rest of one’s body. Devon also enacts this reality:

This isn’t any different than if I had a big dick and was fucking them. It’s the same thing, a strap on and a dick, really, and I think about that sometimes, too. I mean I have a tongue, I have fingers, and I also have a big collection of dildos to choose from, so if a girl wants one size, she can have it and then if she changes her mind and wants bigger or smaller, then it’s just a matter of me changing it. (Devon, in Rose, 2010: 71)

What may have been purchased as a “strap-on dildo” becomes something else: Martino’s “false penis,” Tommy’s “cock,” Devon’s “dick.” Further, trans men can
also use a similar sense of extending their embodiment through other men. Trans man Joseph Nutini (2008) relates his experience of this in his story “The adventures of a trans man in love, sex, and spirituality”:

He has also helped me see more closely what it is like to function as a man. I have sat behind him and masturbated him while playing with myself as well. I have knelt behind him and put him inside my girlfriend then guided his motions from behind. We have also had sex where he is penetrating me and I am penetrating my girlfriend. Each time this was very spiritual and energetic. We both get into a somewhat meditative state before we are able to do this for, and with, each other. Our eyes are always closed and we try to match each other’s breaths as well as our body movements. While I sometimes have a hard time with this because I will never get to feel what he does, it has also been my most rewarding experience. (pp. 172–3)

Nutini’s connection with this man, their sexual interactions together and with Nutini’s girlfriend all do work to materialize maleness through sexual narrative-practices.

A second form of translation, also identified by Hale, involves the resignification of particular body parts into a male (or trans male) register. In his autobiography The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Change from Female to Male, Max Wolf Valerio describes his sexual relationship with his genitals:

Since my clitoris has grown, I have genitals that are noticeably different from my female partners’. Some have remarked that as far as they are concerned, my homegrown, small ‘neocock’ is indeed a penis and they relate to it as such. (2006: 317)

Here, Valerio’s partners are integral in his shifting understanding (and enacting) of his male anatomy. For Zed (2010), his sex partners, too, work to produce his maleness sexually, although he initiates the appropriate language to describe his body:

I also tell them [potential lovers] that what I have is a hole and not a vagina. I also tell them to refer to my dick as my dick, my cock or my penis. It’s not a clit or a dicklet. It’s my penis. […] I make sure to use lots of cock talk and penis language, especially when he’s sucking on my dick. That’s why I usually get penetrated in the ass, too, but I also like how it feels better. It makes me feel more male, more gay, I guess. (in Rose, 2010: 55–7)

Zed’s maleness is materialized by using male sexual language and by in engaging in (what he understands as) male sexual practices. For Zed, his anatomy makes sense through traditional genital terminology (“penis”), but for other trans men, they use neologisms to describe something other than a penis or a clitoris, including but not limited to: “dicklet” (see Block, 2010), “neocock” (see Valerio, 2006), “hybrid” (see Fred in Cameron, 2001), “butch-cock” (see Lindstrom, 2008),
“clit/dick or click” (see Gallegos in Rose, 2010: 73). While for Zed it “usually” feels “more male, more gay” to “get penetrated in the ass,” this is not the only way to receptively materialize maleness for trans men. As Hale (2003) describes, the work of resignification can materialize maleness through other sexual narrative-practices too:

Thus, if the body part a leatherdyke daddy is fisting is that which a physician would unequivocally deem a “vagina,” it may be resignified so that its use for erotic pleasure is consistent with male masculinity. It may become a “hole,” “fuckhole,” “manhole,” “boyhole,” “asshole,” or “butthole,” [among others] and a leatherdyke boy pleading, “Please, Daddy, fuck my butt!” may be asking daddy to fuck the same orifice into which a physician would insert a speculum to perform a pap smear. (Hale, 2003: 66)

Jody Rose makes this point more personally:

I’m finally admitting that I don’t mind having a vagina. Why does it matter if I feel pleasure there? *It doesn’t have to be ‘female’ pleasure; pleasure is pleasure,* and I don’t need to label or define my pleasure based on gender …. *I have a masculine, male vagina* with an enlarged two inch clit that gets thick and hard and can get sucked – that can go inside a woman the way a thumb would. I can have sex with my enlarged clit/dick, and when I do it, my vagina gets wet. (in Cotten, 2012: 8; my emphasis)

Even as Helfand uses traditional genital terminology (‘vagina’) his sexual narrative-practices makes his vagina male.

Further possibilities for this form of translation become clear in the explicit vocalization of sexual practices for genderqueer/trans Kai Kohlsdorf (2011) and his lover Joey:

When we fuck, we often talk to each other and say what we’re doing. To an outsider, it probably doesn’t match what they see is going on. […] Renaming, reclaiming, and resexing ourselves has resulted in us deciding together what is and is not a cock, a chest, or a finger. He can have his cock strapped on, fucking my tits, and suddenly my tits are fake, and his dick is real. (p. 110)

For Valerio, Zed, Rose and Kohlsdorf they “resex” their bodies through narrative and sexual practices together.

“[H]e’s Daddy even when I top him”: Addition

Sometimes in order to make a singular coherent phenomenon (“maleness”), multiple sex-gender phenomena are added together to produce a composite assemblage that makes sense through narrative-practices. Mol describes this kind of process as *addition:* “the fact that different objects may be added together and thereby turned into one doesn’t depend on the projected existence of a single object that
was waiting in the body. Singularity can also be deliberately strived after. It can be produced” (Mol, 2002: 70). In this context, maleness can be understood not as something inherently discrete residing in one’s body, but rather as an achievement.

One way trans men achieve maleness relationally through addition is validation. For example, L. Winterset (2011) writes in his story “Unicorn”: “The first time I had sex with her, I knew I was truly male. My maleness became all the more apparent knowing she believed in its existence as much as I did” (p. 134). In Winterset’s story, there is corroboration that relies on his sex partner: she witnesses and reaffirms his maleness through sex. Similarly, writer Nick Krieger (2011), then Nina, recalls the feeling of his lover exclaiming: “Nina is the cutest boy here”, as he writes in his autobiography Nina Here Nor There: “I felt the colossal power behind Ramona’s words, her validation all the more pronounced because no girl had ever acknowledged me in that way before” (p. 102). Ramona sees Krieger’s maleness, it aligns with his idea of his maleness, and so they appear singular because they enact maleness together, although the enactments are more than one. We can see the work of sex partners’ validation in Kohlsdorf’s (2011) story also:

We navigate his conflicted feelings of wanting to be topped and his fears of losing his masculinity by reaffirming that he’s Daddy even when I top him. After he cums, he usually asks for validation that I do not think he is any less of a man because he likes sex in certain positions. We get close, we cuddle, and I stroke his male ego a little. (p. 109)

The possibility of certain sex acts (and certain positions) being perceived as female – or at odds with maleness – are smoothed away through this narrative. It is the narrative that serves to keep sexual practices and femaleness apart. Yet there is more at work here. Through Joey’s relationship with Kohlsdorf, his maleness is validated even if he likes sex in certain positions. Sex in certain positions and maleness are to a certain extent kept apart (distributed), but they are also brought together and reassembled through the relationship. Joey’s relationship with Kohlsdorf coordinates the tensions of sex in certain positions and his feelings of maleness. For writer and broadcaster Jacob Anderson-Minshall (2008) in his story “Queerly beloved”, it is his one continuous relationship that coordinates his sexuality:

I’m not straight – I’m married. Within the context of that monogamous marriage it doesn’t matter that I find gay men hot or that I like watching gay porn or even that, never having had sex with a man, I’m intrigued and have fantasized about what it would be like (not every position, mind you). As a married, monogamous man, I take whatever erotic input I receive and express that in bed with my wife. (p. 107; original emphasis)

In this way, trans men can materialize their sexual maleness through ongoing relationships, as well as specific sexual encounters. LGBT rights advocate Chaz Bono (2012) explains in his autobiography Transition, occupying what he and his lover (Joan) understand as a “male sex role” enacts his maleness in this way:
I didn’t quite understand my dynamic with Joan at the time; I probably would have explained it like this: “She treats me like a butch, and she is a femme, and that’s part of the reason we work so well together.” Obviously, I hadn’t yet realized that I was a transgender male. But what I did know was that Joan really responded to my masculine energy in a very feminine way, and this made me feel incredibly at ease, powerful, and sexual with her. (p. 103)

What this “masculine energy” means in practice of course varies. What is important here is how individuals (with their partners) understand particular practices: how they make sense doing maleness.

Following from this, trans men’s sexual desires and practices can also be imagined (and in that way enacted) as male without a partner. Former editor of the newsletter *FTM International* and current President of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH), Jamison Green (2004) describes such an experience in his autobiography *Becoming a Visible Man*:

> The one thing that has always been consistent for me when I think of physical pleasure is a desire to place myself inside a woman, to feel the difference in her skin – her smoothness, her resilience, as opposed to my muscled rigidity – the wetness of her mouth, of her vagina, sucking me in where I can expand and swell and work the magic of connection. (p. 150)

Green’s description of his sexual desires as having “always been consistent” reifies his maleness through his sexuality; that is, sex-gender and sexuality are co-enacted across time. While his body may change, his (hetero)sexual desire remains stable. Similarly, queer activist Jakob Hero (2011) relates his childhood, adolescent and adult sexual desires in his story “Out of the darkness” as those of a gay man attracted to gay men (pp. 26–31).

“In the beginning I could never penetrate him anally”: Distribution

Instead of being translated or added together, trans men may assemble their maleness by keeping certain sex-gender phenomena apart, spatially and temporally. Mol calls this strategy distribution. “Distribution, instead, sets apart what also, elsewhere, a little further along, or slightly later, is linked up again” (Mol, 2002: 117). To describe this way of organizing and assembling multiple enactments, Mol uses the metaphor of an “itinerary” (p. 115); what is one thing at one point is something else at another point, in another place and time. Author of *The FTM Sex Guide*, Jody Rose (2010) explains his sexual strategy: “When we were naked, I was always uncomfortable because my breasts got in the way, but the women I chose to date were very sensitive and did what they could to simply ignore my breasts” (p. 13; emphasis added). Here, Rose describes a situation where his maleness can be enacted without excluding sexual activity completely, but rather, Rose finds a way to manage his discomfort and his maleness: his breasts are kept apart from...
sexual activity. Importantly, Rose’s assemblage of maleness in this way hinges on the action of his sex partners. It is his lovers who must ignore his breasts in order to enact his maleness in sexual encounters. Thompson’s description – “Having a woman touch me sexually would have broken my detachment” (1995: 75) – also emphasizes the narrative-practical work of distribution and the compliance of a lover. As Mol suggests, “Work may go on so long as the different parties do not seek to occupy the same spot. So long as they are separated between sites in some sort of distribution” (2002: 88).

Returning to Kohlshdorf’s (2011) story, he describes using sexual practices in ways that change over time as Joey’s maleness changes composition:

In the beginning I could never penetrate him anally. His dominance was much more important to him because that was the only tangible way he could feel male before identifying as trans. Our sex, in which he is dominant, now serves as validation where it used to serve as his only recourse to himself. As a result, there is now more freedom in what we do. In the beginning, when he had only been identifying publically as trans for a couple of months, we believed his emotional attachments and problems with sex acts might diminish as he became more comfortable and was frequently validated as male in other areas of his life. This has absolutely been the case for us. It took our sex, and my acceptance and acknowledgement of his masculinity, for him to come out as trans. (p. 110)

As Kohlshdorf’s account suggests, after being “validated as male in other areas of his life”, Joey relies less on sexual practices: the work of the narrative (and practices) changes. Joey’s maleness is made up of a number of coordinating (and at times, conflicting) sex-gender enactments and how they are assembled is distributed across time: as more enactments align as male in certain contexts, others become less important.15

Conclusions

When I tell people that I actually physically enjoy penetration, they freak out. I am very masculine after all. Still, the goddess blessed me with having an extra hole that feels good when penetrated correctly. I don’t have any gendered association with this part of my body though. Actually, I often masculinize it by calling it my “manpussy” or “boycunt” and so on. So for me, it means very little to be penetrated except that it is often quite pleasurable. I would trade it for a penis any day but it is what I have and I choose not to hate it. After all, it is all part of the transmale experience in my mind. (Nutini, 2008: 172)

In this passage, Nutini weaves together multiple enactments and possibilities of sex-gender, maleness, transexuality, embodiment, sexuality, pleasure and conditions of possibility. In this way, he creates a narrative that coordinates multiple enactments,
coheres tensions and through which he – as a trans man who enjoys various pleasures – hangs together. In his narrative we can see translation, distribution, addition and coordination at work. While I have tried to separate these various assemblages so as to best explain them in this essay, in practice they tend to be more partial, overlapping, messier. Nutini also makes clear his investment in trans sexuality and trans maleness in their specificity, as well as the agency he has in deciding how to understand (and enact) his body. Indeed, these tensions – between sex-gender, materiality and pleasure – and the work trans men do to assemble and cohere these multiple enactments constitutes trans sexualities. Reading Thomas Kuhn (1962), Mol reminds us:

The senses only perceive what makes sense to them. And only that which fits with earlier perceptions and with theories about them may hope to make sense. The only exceptions to this are a few anomalies that linger in the margins until, one day, they fit into a new paradigm. (Mol, 2002: 73)

In this essay, I have argued for a new paradigm in understanding trans men – and trans male sexualities in particular – by showing a handful of the myriad ways trans men make sense of their maleness in sexual practices. For some men their bodies are an impediment to sexual interaction, for some they are not. For the vast majority it is not an insurmountable obstacle. The labor of narrativizing their maleness through sexual practices emphasizes how sex functions as a sex-gender intervention (following Hale). Expanding Hale’s articulation of sex-gender as sexually situated through Mol’s praxiographic method, I have shown how STS offers a way for trans and sexuality studies to more usefully account for the specificity of trans embodiments. I have also extended Mol’s ideas on multiplicity to emphasize the work of narrative in how multiple phenomena hang together. In a variety of ways, sexual narrative-practices act to assemble multiple sex-gender enactments and materialize maleness for trans men (and their partners) through organizing strategies that include mutual exclusion, alignment, translation, addition and distribution. The picture I have outlined through these examples is not complete. There are more ways that trans men materialize maleness, and by looking to the practical details of enacting sex-gender in narrative-practices, we can see how. My attention to sexual narrative-practices suggests they constitute one intervention, not unlike surgical or hormonal interventions, through which trans people find “a form we can be comfortable enough to live in” (Lowrey, 2011: 96). Following this way of thinking, we can more fully understand and appreciate the realities of trans lives, and the inadequacies of clinical diagnosis.

There are two important implications of seeing sex-gender in this way: first, assembling sex-gender through narrative-practices is not limited only to trans men (or trans people, or sexual contexts); and second, these narratives of trans sexual pleasure trouble the clinical expectations of diagnosing “gender dysphoria” (the current psychiatric label ascribed to trans people’s desires for body modifications [see American Psychiatric Association, 2013]). Clinical requirements for
diagnosis demand trans sexual practices be (described as) replicating stereotypical “sex roles,” fantasies and imagined normative (read: non-trans) embodiment. In most instances this means, practically, that sexual interactions must be avoided (or concealed) in order to achieve the diagnosis and therefore access body-modifying interventions. That is, this current institutional material-discourse produces sexuality and transexuality as mutually exclusive. But as we have seen, this is not always or necessarily the case for trans men themselves. Trans people do enjoy sexual pleasures in a wide variety of ways. Yet in order to achieve the diagnosis, trans people must represent themselves within narrow clinical ideals of sex-gender: ideals that reify normative sex-gender, sexuality and embodiment. As I have shown in this essay, these normative standards are just not relevant to many trans people’s necessarily complex experiences of sex-gender and embodiment. It is my contention that the diagnostic focus on self-loathing and occlusion of sexuality cannot take seriously the lived realities of trans people. Excluding access to body-modifying interventions to those whose experiences diverge from a stereotypical diagnostic logic does not engage trans people’s embodiment on our own terms. As such, trans people continue to tailor their stories to fit limited ideas of sex-gender and trans sexualities in clinical contexts, and beyond.

What to do? We are (all) produced through the practices to which we are subjected. For trans people seeking medically supervised body modifications, clinical treatment pathways are often composed of barriers: geographically sparse, financially expensive, psychologically intrusive, emotionally harmful, administratively difficult, just to name a few. On top of that, it is trans people who are expected to produce a narrative in line with clinical sex-gender, and not the other way around. What would it look like if clinicians supported trans people’s sense of themselves, including those of us who do not experience our bodies as repulsive or asexual, yet still desire to physically change (in some ways and perhaps not all)? Unfortunately the threat of withholding services (surgeries, hormones) means that it is almost impossible to know (see, for examples, Lee in Sanger, 2010: 82–3; Spade, 2006). Trans people have so much to lose from even attempting to describe something that does not fit within clinical definitions of gender and gender dysphoria. Indeed, there is a reason the stories presented here come from edited collections produced by trans people themselves, and not from clinical case studies. I cannot even imagine Nutini’s story relayed in a clinical context, or Kohlsdorf’s, or indeed most of the stories I have presented here. And yet these are people making sense of their circumstances.

The fact remains that as long as medical professionals – acting as gatekeepers who determine trans people’s access to body modifying interventions – rely heavily on a diagnostic category (and narrative) that presumes genital-loathing prior to medical intervention, the realities of how trans people make sense of their bodies in ways that may include sexual practices must necessarily be neglected. Not only does this limit an understanding of trans lives, it precludes adequate health care. The point I am making here is if we understand sex-gender as enacted in practice, we must attend to a different set of possibilities, more likely to do justice to the wide variety of ways that trans men materialize maleness, including sexually.
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Notes

1. “Ze/hir” are gender-neutral pronouns popularized by Kate Bornstein (1998) in *My Gender Workbook*. Throughout this essay, pronouns and descriptions are taken from author biographies provided in published works and/or recent web activity. I have done my best to characterize authors as accurately as possible at the time of publication of this essay. Individuals featured herein who wish for their descriptions or pronouns to be altered are encouraged to contact me.

2. Trans people’s stories are shaped through a clinical autobiographical imperative (see Prosser, 1998).

3. Notable exceptions include Cromwell (1999), Devor (1999 [1997]) and a recent special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* on “Trans Sexualities” (see Pfeffer, 2014).

4. Davy and Steinbock (2012) astutely observe that “this redrawing of the boundaries of sexual pathologies also keeps the universality of transgender pathology current” and tends to “elevate conservative social norms” (p. 274).

5. I use “sex-gender” and “narrative-practices” following Barad, who uses contractions including “material-discursive” and “onto-epistem-ology” to emphasize the mutual entanglement and co-constitution of phenomena. Barad articulates this point through the concept of “intra-action” explained below.

6. For more on Mol on perspectivism and multiplicity, see Law (2004: 51–7).

7. Following Barad’s critique of “interaction” (outlined above), I think Mol’s concept of “interference” necessarily (and problematically) assumes a separation of entities.

8. Hale describes his decision to use feminine pronouns in a footnote to his article: “My use of feminine pronouns to refer to leatherdyke boys and daddies in this article is an artificial and problematic means of communicating with readers who do not and have not participated in leatherdyke community circles” (Hale, 2003: 69).

9. It is important to note that Hale (2003) in no way suggests this way of organizing sex-gender makes sense for everyone. Rather, he notes its limitations (see p. 66).

10. Through that project and following the lead of Jay Prosser (1998), I developed a Prosserian “trans reading strategy”, which seeks to take trans men’s claims about themselves on their own terms. The best way I found to do this was by using the frameworks offered by Barad and Mol of understanding phenomena as multiple, assembled and enacted in practice. As I argue throughout this essay, this way of thinking allows us to take seriously trans men’s realities on their own terms, whilst simultaneously extending trans, sexuality and materiality studies.
11. It is also important to note here who gets to write books: the authors are overwhelmingly white, and American (only Rees and Thompson are from the UK), and while Cotten’s (2012) collection is made up of a significantly racially and ethnically diverse population, his contributors are overwhelmingly based in California. However, as these are published books, internationally available to an English-reading audience, they are the canon of trans men’s story-telling, and a place to start. There are dozens of trans people who have taken the time to write and publish their experiences, and this wealth of material has received little scholarly attention. I hope that my work here will be taken up by trans scholars across many more sites.

12. These stories affirm traditional narratives of transexuality, namely that trans people do not engage with others sexually “until” they obtain “complete conversion” (Benjamin, 1999 [1966]). While this idea of alignment is the very picture of clinical transexuality, both Thompson (1995) and Green (2004) convey that they still had sexual relationships before undergoing genital surgeries.

13. Here I am extending Mol’s concept of “translation” quite boldly by emphasizing the practice of translation as action (see Mol, 2002: 72–83).

14. Bono (2012) and Green’s (2004) ways of coordinating sexual desire across time are narrative strategies encouraged in medical contexts enacting transexuality (proving oneself worthy of the diagnosis, and thus access to body modifications). A smooth narrative of maleness (across one’s entire life) tends to put one in the best position for achieving these goals.

15. This way of articulating a changing masculinity has been noted by Raine Dozier (2005), who asserts that as FTMs become legibly male, they can relax “hypermasculine” traits or behaviours and still be recognized as men. For the FTMs in Dozier’s study, as maleness became physically and socially recognizable, they became less reliant on other social cues in order to be perceived as male. Dozier explains:

Perceived sex and individual behavior are compensatory, and both are responsible for the performance of gender: When sex is ambiguous or less convincing, there is increased reliance on highly gendered behavior; when sex is obvious, then there is considerably more freedom in behavior. (p. 304)

In the accounts I am discussing here, the “changing perception” need not be (only) physical, but is more usefully understood as shifting narrative-practices.

References


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