

Making life livable

Transsexuality and bodily transformation

Kathleen Lennon

[We] do not recognize ourselves at the level of feeling, desire and the body, at the moments before the mirror, in the moments before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may well feel like the unrecognizability of one's gender and hence the unrecognizability of one's personhood.¹

The aim of this article is to try and make sense of transsexual² desire for body modification, given the apparent inadequacy of a certain model of understanding this desire. This model, in a way that makes the issue complex, is the one informing psychiatric and surgical practice, and perceived conformity to it is often necessary for access to the hormones and surgery which bring about the desired bodily transformations. The problematic model is something like this. From an early age transsexual people take themselves to have a gender which is at variance with the biological sex of their body. They experience themselves as having 'the wrong body'. They experience their body as alien because it fails to capture their gender identity. Here, gender identity is conceived of as something fixed independently of the body, somehow lying behind it, which the body can fail to reflect. Body modification is desired to bring bodies into line with the 'real' gender identity which is taken to constitute subjectivity. Body modification brings experienced gender and bodily sex into line and enables people to live as 'real' women and men. As Jay Prosser remarks:

transsexuality in fact appears as a narrative; a plot typically beginning in childhood recognition of cross-gendered difference and ending, again typically, with the transsexual achieving some marker of becoming, ... some degree of closure.³

In these narratives there are certain recurrent features (the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body, childhood feelings of difference and a failure to conform to gendered stereotypes) and a telos: the reaching of a

home of gendered realness most commonly achieved by some degree of bodily modification which enables the possibility of social passing. Here the changing of the flesh, the modification of the body, is taken as the guarantee of a gendered realness. Such a narrative claims a communality of 'real gender' between transsexual men and women and biological men and women who comfortably inhabit their categories as male and female.

There are a number of problems with this picture. In what could such gendered realness consist? It does not appear to have its origin in the biological body for we have to employ technological means to bring the body into line with it. Moreover the picture assumes a single kind of narrative when there are in fact many:

not everyone who experiences gender dysphoria experiences it in the same way, and not everyone deals with it in the same way. Not all transgendered individuals take hormones and not everyone who takes hormones is transgendered. I have a (genetically female) friend who identifies as male and passes perfectly. He's never had a shot. I certainly know dykes who are butcher than I could ever be, but who wouldn't consider identifying as anything other than women.⁴

Furthermore the assumption of a 'real gender', originating in childhood, rules out other possibilities:

it can't be ... that you went to ... clubs ... saw that certain ways of living were possible and desirable, and that something about your own possibilities became clear to you.⁵

Moreover, even when surgery takes place there is no comfortable home. The body retains traces, often severe scarring; and in female-to-male transitions, for example, there is no way to reproduce a functioning penis. Surgery and hormones seem to be no guarantee of gaining a body with a 'real gender', whatever that might be.⁶

In this article I want to try and make sense of the demand for bodily modification without an assumption that in some ontological or originary way, anyone, including those seeking surgery or hormones, are really men and women. I shall suggest that gender identities, along with others, are something which we may lay claim to, on our own behalf and on behalf of others. The article is not an attempt to provide conditions which fix gender identity. It is rather, in the absence of a 'truth about gender', an attempt to make intelligible people laying claim to being male or female and in some instances expressing that claim by a request for body modification.

Beyond queer?

In contrast to a model of transsexuality which requires a conception of real gender identity, the advent of queer theory offered a quite different kind of analysis. Trans people of all kind, whether seeking bodily modification or not, were now seen as 'gender outlaws', making evident the social constructedness of the gender identities of us all. For Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*,⁷ concerned to denaturalize all gender categories, transgendered people challenge the normative categorization into male and female and open up the possibility of numerous sex/gender/sexual identifications, highlighting the radical indeterminateness of positioning in the sex/gender system. Sandy Stone agrees:

I am suggesting that in the transsexual's erased history we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender.... For a transsexual, as a transsexual, to generate a ... counter discourse is to speak from outside the boundaries of gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have been predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible.... In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries.⁸

In queer theory, therefore, transsexuality becomes the marker of the fictionality of all gendered categories and their potential for performative re-articulation.

Within this early queer theory, transgendering of all kinds finds a theoretical home only by being positioned as a vanguard of political activism, challenging public gender norms. And although many transgendered people may accept a position as gender outlaw, for others it seems inappropriate. They are often seeking a form of life as male and female in which gender norms are adopted rather than undermined.

Moreover, the positioning of all trans people as such a political vanguard cannot make sense of the transsexual demand for sexed *embodiment*, other than as a misguided naturalism about sexual identity, consequent on immersion in hegemonic discourses. There are certainly many trans people who do not request bodily modification, and many who are happy for their trans identities to be easily visible. But there are many others for whom the goals of 'passing' and, interconnectedly, of bodily change, seem necessary for a functional life. The performative account of gender, found in Butler's early work, does not make sufficient sense for this latter group.

Butler has returned to the discussion of the trans community and issues of bodily transformation in her more recent work. Here she retains transsexuality as a marker within a discourse of liberation and emancipation:

drag, butch, femme, transgender, transsexual persons ... show us ... the body is not ... a static and accomplished fact but ... a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.⁹

This, in itself, is problematic, given how many transsexual narratives read more like stories of survival than stories of liberation. However, this later discussion is also marked by a more sober reflection on the conditions which make living within a social community possible. Butler introduces a consideration of the conditions which make a life *livable*, and it is in relation to this, that we are to understand and justify the demands that 'gender ... be established ... non-coercively'.¹⁰ In raising the question of what makes a life livable or unlivable Butler has in mind both the external violence which is often directed against the trans community,¹¹ and the rates of suicide and self-harm found within it. (And both factors sit in uneasy tension with the concurrent emancipatory discourse that produces these levels of violence.) For Butler it is a lack of *recognition* of bodily difference. She adopts the Hegelian position 'that desire is always a desire for recognition, and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us become constituted as socially viable beings'.¹² This recognition is offered according to prevailing social norms. But

if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends on escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred ... I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel

that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable.¹³

For Butler this renders urgent the task of transforming the prevailing social norms to allow recognition of forms of bodily difference that are, according to her, currently rendered unintelligible. It is this public unintelligibility which leads to the status of *unlivability*. Echoing her earlier work, enabling such recognition requires the reconfiguration of these norms. Again the trans person seems to have no option but to be in the vanguard of a public political activism. When our systems of classification and public norms have been transformed so that certain bodily shapes no longer signal patterns of gendered behaviour, or of desire – indeed, when such patterns of behaviour no longer line up together in ways that yield dichotomies of gender – there will not be issues of public unintelligibility, and consequently no need for surgery to try and bring it about. For Butler, then, what is needed for those who find themselves unintelligible in terms of public norms is to challenge and re-articulate them. These are important strategies. But such political activism should not be the especial or required preserve of those who lay claim to trans identities. For many people, if they are to make sense of themselves and other people are to make sense of them, the only route which appears to be open to make their life livable is some kind of accommodation with public forms of intelligibility.

I want therefore to develop Butler's thoughts about what makes a life livable in a somewhat different direction, one which stresses not recognition under some general norm, but mutual intelligibility within everyday practices.¹⁴ For Butler intelligibility requires conformity to some public norm. I would like to suggest, in contrast, that intelligibility consists of people being able to 'find their feet' with each other in everyday interactions. It is this kind of making sense to ourselves and others, which I would suggest is necessary if life is to be livable. Making sense is a public project. As Butler says, I am 'struggling for ... a conception of myself as invariably in a community, impressed on by others impressing them as well'.¹⁵ It is into this ongoing interaction that our gendered categories fit, bestowing meaning interdependently on our bodies and our modes of engaging with others, making shared engagement with the world possible. Finding life *unlivable* here is not being able to find one's feet in the everyday practices of the variable, and local, communities, in which we are placed. To lay claim to an identity as male or female, or as a trans man or woman, is to struggle to find one's place in such practices.

In a recent book Norah Vincent describes a period of her life in which she lived as a man. The extract below illustrates well what is involved in finding one's feet in everyday practices in a way that requires a gendered position. Vincent describes the sets of relations into which she enters when she takes part, as a man, in a bowling team.

The league manager led me toward the table where my new team-mates were sitting. Jim, my team captain, introduced himself first. Next I met Allen. His greeting echoed Jim's – a presumption of goodwill that seemed to mark me as a buddy from the start. Bob I met last. We didn't shake hands, just nodded from across the table. ... We all usually ate junk food on those Monday nights, all of us except Bob, who stuck to beer, but let us send his 12-year-old son Alex, who always tagged along on league night, next door to the 7-Eleven to buy hot dogs, candy, soda, whatever.... Everything was out and above board with these guys. If they were pissed at you, you'd know it. They were glad enough to see me, but not glad enough to miss me if I didn't show. They were coming from long, wearying workdays and they didn't have the energy for pretence ... Jim was the most forthcoming about his stupid flights of machismo and the dumpsters they'd usually landed him in. 'I remember when I was in the army,' he'd say, 'and I was drunk off my ass as usual. And there was this huge guy playin' pool in the bar I was in. And I don't know why, but I just flicked a beer coaster at him, and it hit him right in the back of the head. And he turned around really slowly and he looked down at me and he said in this really tired way, "Do we really need to do this tonight?" And I said, "Nah, you're right. We don't. Sorry." So he turned around, and fuck me if I didn't just throw another one and hit him again, right in the back of the head. I don't know why I did it. No fuckin' idea. And I knew when I did it that he was gonna kick my ass, so I turned around and tried to run, and I slipped in a puddle of beer and fell on my face, and he just picked me right up and bashed the shit out of me. And the funniest thing about it was that the whole time he was punching me, he kept apologizing to me for having to do it.' This was a source of hilarity to everyone, the stupid crap you felt compelled to do as a guy finding your spot in the scheme of things. I could never have predicted it, but part of me came really to enjoy those nights with the guys. Their company was like an anchor at the beginning of the week, something I could look forward to, an oasis.¹⁶

The interactions, the modes of response, which Vincent describes were made possible by the participants taking themselves to be engaging in shared practices of masculinity; practices, incidentally, which could accommodate her lack of skill and strength as one of the possibilities which could be negotiated:

after a couple of months when they got to know me a little better that they felt free enough to kid me now and then about how much I sucked, letting me in. 'Hey, we all got strikes this round,' Bob would say, 'except one. Who was that, I wonder?' Then he'd smile at me while leaning back in his chair, dragging deeply on his cigarette. I'd make a big show of giving him the finger, and we'd all laugh.¹⁷

The use of gendered categories in ongoing and necessarily public narratives of the self and the inter-connected forms of life that they make possible, does not require any set of characteristics shared by all people who use the categories in the stories they tell about themselves. Gender is often a question of 'local reading', and even in local contexts can be very variable. Contrast the kind of femininity claimed in the following two extracts:

Becky Birtha ... is eight when she 'spied this lady.' 'She ain't nobodies mama – I'm sure. And she ain't wearing Sunday clothes. She got on blue jeans and a man's shirt, with the tail hanging out. She got patches on her blue jeans and she still got her chin stuck out like she some kinda african royalty.'¹⁸

I feel small and neat ... My blouse and skirt are light.... My shoes make my feet look more delicate than they are, besides giving me ... a suggestion of vulnerability that I rather like ... when I walk out into the street I feel ready for the world's appraisal, in a way I never felt as a man.¹⁹

Consequently in different situations people might use a different terminology to give an account of themselves. Patricia Zavelleas tells the story of Maria Perez. Maria, growing up in Mexico, and coming to desire women, articulates her subjectivity as 'male' and adopts the machismo which went with it. Later, moving to the USA and finding lesbian communities with a different range of gendered possibilities, she sees herself as a woman, and allows her body shape to change, to become rounder.²⁰

An account of gendered and other identity categories as being anchored simply in an ability to find one's feet in everyday practices with others, in a way that allows mutual intelligibility, may seem overly conservative. It can suggest that we are stuck with the frameworks in which we find ourselves, and have to locate ourselves within them. But such a conclusion underestimates the openness of our linguistic categories and their inter-related forms of life. In laying claim to an identity as 'woman', and to the intelligible place in communal practices which that suggests, the transsexual woman is also reconfiguring that category. But if her life is to be livable in the sense I have described, then that reconfiguration needs to be one which others around her can find intelligible too. Of course it is often the case that such intelligibility can be found within certain communities and not others. Where it is absent, the only way to make life livable is to seek to 'pass'. The closest way of making sense of one's life



and being able to participate in shared practices may simply be to position oneself as 'male' or 'female'. What we find in transsexual autobiography are subjects painfully negotiating gendered positions which best make sense of their life and desires and enable them to take part in shared communal practices where they can interact and be made sense of by others. The possibility of negotiating an intelligible subjectivity, which requires finding possible modes of sociability, are increased when our categories are reconfigured to allow transgending, and when the content of the categories man and woman visibly display a large range of non-dichotomous social interactions. Here the possibilities for finding one's feet expand.

Expressive content

To stress the importance of communal practices in our lives is not to claim that our identity is fixed by the recognition of others. It is problematic to think of identities as being 'fixed', as constituting some truth about ourselves, whether that fixing is linked to 'inner' phenomenology or 'outer' processes of recognition. The concern is rather to signal the role communal practices play in making life livable, and the positioning within them of identity claims made on our own behalf or on behalf of others. What is central is the possibility of mutual intelligibility in our everyday life. We can explore this, I suggest, without commitment to some kind of originary identity, or to a view that sees social practices as themselves determining.

What might seem to mark the transsexual use of gendered terms is the sense of operating with a language which does not feel like their own. What marks transsexual identity, Prosser claims, is 'the failure to be real' ... but 'a longing or yearning to be so'.²¹ In his autobiographical *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida uses his own position as an Algerian Jew, speaking French, the language of the colonizers, to reflect on the position of the monolingual individual who 'has only one language, but one which is not his'.²² In this text Derrida recognizes a desire to assign an origin to the complexity of such felt displacement, by imagining an originary language in which the truth of identity could be spoken. But, of course, there is no such source and no such origin, and the desire has to be viewed as a desire to invent, as a first language, that which never existed, 'as though the point were to produce by avowal, the truth of what had never taken place "to create" a past that has never been present, with a thought of the future or the "to come"'.²³

Maybe it is in this light that we should view the transsexual narratives with the trajectory we began

by describing. Derrida's account may be thought to apply particularly to the post-colonial context, or, as adapted here, to the position of trans identities, in which childhood is revisited in the light of present desires and the narrative of one's life is presented as a search for an originating identity. But Derrida also suggests that the search for such an originary language is a desire we all share, as we fail to recognize our singularity in what is on offer to us. What we must recognize, he suggests, is that any identity is only a 'relatively gathered dispersion or scatter of singularities ... which must not be mortgaged to the phantom of ... ontological fulfilment'.²⁴ Here the phantom of ontological fulfilment is the phantom of an originary identity which guarantees or legitimates the place we wish to claim in our local interactions. In its place is simply a picture of people laying claim to a position in which they find it possible to live.

Trans men and women lay claim to gendered terms, as relatively gathered singularities, to be enabled to take part in local, communal social practices in a way that is intelligible to themselves and others. The terms are employed to make life livable. In doing this the content of these terms are also reconfigured in ways that reverberate through the narratives of a range of so-called biological men and women, many of whom are variously embodied, who also claim them. How, specifically, does this impact on the body itself? How does it help us make sense of the desire for bodily modification? Why is bodily change necessary to make life livable? Is to desire bodily modification to be taken in by 'the phantom of ontological fulfilment', which Derrida warns us against? I want to suggest that we can understand such a desire without such metaphysical commitments.

There are different models of the relationship between the body and the self which can be employed here. One account sees the relation between the self and the body as one of ownership. If my body is owned by me then I can exercise my autonomy by styling that body in the way I please, in a way which I find reflects my inner self, or perhaps to approximate to the ideals of gendered embodiment which surround me. A parallel account could here be offered of the practice of cosmetic surgery, and there are writers who want to offer this shared justification for both practices:

The reason I say it's cosmetic surgery is because people are always changing their bodies ... maybe we would take the stigma away. We wouldn't see it as ... pathological [but] a way of organizing your body to suit your image of yourself ... 'why do you want to become a man?' ... 'because I prefer the

way a penis looks on my body to the way a vagina looks on my body.’²⁵

However, this account suggests a problematic view of the relation between the body and the self. In Weiss’s words ‘we must resist a notion of gender as a way of wearing one’s flesh as corporeal sign’.²⁶ This is problematic to the extent that the self is seen as constituted independently of the body, and the body as some object which that self possesses and can construct in a way that expresses their style preference. This can neither capture the horror which many transsexual people feel towards aspects of their embodiment, nor recognize the way in which embodiment is *constitutive* of selfhood. It is this which we need to understand if we are both to make sense of requests for bodily modification, and to justify public facilitation of it.

Another account sees the body as simply a marker of gender identity, which enables it to be read in a communal context. Bodily changes are then sought to allow others to gauge, in an immediate way, the category in which we wished to be placed.

I want the phalloplasty because I want to be able to go swimming [which includes of course being able to use the male changing rooms]. I don’t have a problem once I’m wearing my swimming costume, or when I am dressed. It’s the transition period when you wonder if anyone is going to wonder.²⁷

There is something right about this move, but it cannot be the whole story, as it sees the body only as a sign for others. It fails to address the first-person phenomenology, the unintelligibility which aspects of embodiment can present to oneself.

The relation between the body and self is seen on these accounts as an expressive one. This seems right. The problems arise because of the account of expression which is then employed. For the content of what is expressed is conceived of independently of its vehicle of expression. The vehicle (the body) is then evaluated in terms of how adequately it captures what lies behind. On many accounts of expression, however, this picture is replaced by one in which the content of what is expressed can only be captured by its expressive vehicle. The content of the thought, or sensation or emotional state is yielded by the expression itself. Wittgenstein insists that joy or sadness are present in the face itself, open to public view, and not hidden in some realm behind it. What is involved in detecting such emotions seems to be a recognition of certain contours, as those of fear, or joy or grief. What is recognized is ‘a unity, a certain physiognomy’,²⁸ though it seems perfectly possible that the recognition

of such physiognomy as joy is something into which we may need, at least in part, to be initiated. But nonetheless it is the physiognomy itself which yields the joyful content. If we have to define joy, that is what we would show. As Merleau-Ponty points out, ‘the smile, the relaxed face, gaiety of gesture really have in them the rhythm of action, the mode of being in the world, which are joy itself’.²⁹

The body which carries expressive content is not simply the anatomical body. It is a body with a shape or form, which we read directly in terms of the way it carries the way the world is for the subject. The body shape or form carries affective salience or significance for us but it is a significance which is directly perceived, although we may require cultural initiation into such perception. We do not notice the anatomical configuration and derive the joy or sadness for it. We respond to the face directly as joyful or sad. On detecting such physiognomy we are provided with reasons for responding in certain ways – for example, comforting if the expression is pain or sadness, smiling in response to expressions of joy. In suggesting that a grasp of expressive content yields reasons for responding in certain ways, no process of inference need be involved. As Merleau-Ponty points out:

I do not understand the gestures of others by some kind of intellectual interpretation; ... the communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. ...

It is through my body that I understand people.³⁰

It is important to stress that the significance of such bodily shapes requires anchorage in a context and background. Behaviour is expressive only as contextualized, only against particular backgrounds. It is this context which will distinguish expressions of fear, for example, from mere pretence, engaged in, maybe, for the purposes of explaining what fear is:

what determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action.... Seeing life as a weave, this pattern (pretence say) is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways.... And one pattern in the weave is interwoven with many others.³¹

Expressive content then is constituted out of a certain physiognomy, providing non-inferential reasons for a range of intersubjective responses, woven into shared ways of living. Expressive content has a kind of immediacy, reflecting the extent to which we feel

‘at home’ with the expressions, the extent to which we know how to find our way around with them. This means that there are also occasions when we cannot read the physiognomy, cannot find our feet with people, and do not know how to respond to them.³²

Above I suggested that claiming a gender was positioning oneself in the context of everyday social practices. I am now suggesting that such positioning is expressed through the body. ‘At homeness’ in everyday social practices is made possible by an ‘at homeness’ with bodies whose position in those practices is immediate and readable. In the case of the transsexual body, however, the positionality it expresses is not one with which those whose bodies they are can find themselves ‘at home’.

homeless bodies

The physiognomy of the body carries our subjectivity not as a sign of something which lies behind, but as its constituting form. Within phenomenological accounts our sense of self is a sense of a body, and involves an awareness of that body as having a certain shape or form.

My whole body for me is not an assemblage of organs juxtaposed in space. I am in undivided possession of it and know where each of my limbs is through a body image in which each are included. [The body image is] a ‘form’ in the sense used by Gestalt psychology ... an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task.³³

Such a body image is necessary for our intentional engagements with the world, in which the body is experienced as a potentiality for action in the world, and the world as a world of possibility for the body. Our body images are already *morphologies* – that is, mediated forms of organization – not simply brute causal responses to anatomical shape. Within psychoanalytic thought our body image is formed by being invested with affect. Particular bits of the body become significant because of their potential for pleasure and pain, or because they are invested with significance by others.³⁴ Such body images therefore are images of the body as expressive. Our own thoughts, hopes and desires are grasped as bodily possibilities.

One way of trying to make sense of the relation to aspects of their body articulated by some transsexual people would be to suggest a disjuncture between first-person body image and the expressive content that the body has for others. In the account offered by Sartre, for example, the body-for itself, the body engaged in projects in the world, is the body from the first-person point of view. It is this sense of our

bodies and thereby of ourselves, which we struggle to maintain when faced with the look of others. That look fixes the body into a determinate type, with fixed characteristics, which constrain the possibilities for action. That is the look which we must resist if we are to maintain our own autonomy.³⁵ This seems to be the basis of Fanon’s account of arriving in France and discovering the expressive significance his body has for others.

Assailed at various points [my pre-existing] corporeal schema crumbles. I [subject] my self to an objective examination. I [discover] my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I am battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships and above all sho’ good eating.³⁶

However, such a model does not seem to capture transsexual experience. It does not seem that the first person bodily schema of a trans woman prior to treatment is that of a woman. The problem rather is that the body she has is one to which she gives the *same* significance as it is given by others. That is why she wants to change it. Sartre’s account fails to accommodate the role of others in the formation of our first-person corporeal schema. Merleau-Ponty³⁷ emphasizes the importance to the early formation of the subject of the phenomena of imitation, copying the bodily gestures of others, returning a smile with a smile. Here I respond to the actions of another by experiencing them as possibilities for my own body. This process involves a pairing of my body with the body of others. The corporeal schema, or sense of bodily form, which enables my own responsiveness to the world is a schema that is derived from such pairings. The relation with others is therefore formative of the first-person sense of our bodies which informs our possible engagements with the world. Given the role of others in the formation of our first-person corporeal schema, there is not then the radical disjuncture between that schema and the image reflected back from outside, as Sartre and some psychoanalytic theorists suggest. The significance of certain bodily shapes, the expressive force that they carry, to those outside us, becomes integrated into our own sense of our body. (This process is illustrated graphically by Beauvoir in her discussion of the way in which women come to experience themselves as Other to the norm which is masculinity. For example, writing of the young girl’s sense of her body as she reaches puberty, Beauvoir says ‘when the breasts and the body hair is developing, a sentiment is born which sometimes becomes pride but which is originally shame’.³⁸ For Merleau-Ponty our body image was enabling of



our intentional engagement with the world. What is highlighted by Beauvoir and others is that our body feels to us in such a way that it *makes possible* certain kinds of agency and *inhibits* others.

Given this picture, the sense of ourselves as sexed is a sense of ourselves with a bodily form which is expressive of certain possibilities within the world. (It is important to remind ourselves of the multiplicity of those possibilities and of the way that expressive content is dependent on background and context. They are nonetheless possibilities which are carried by a certain physiognomy.) How, then, are we to make sense of people laying claim to a sex/gender which is not that which their bodies express, even to themselves? It is clear that for some people the possibilities for agency and the positions in local practices which are expressed by their bodily morphology are not ones with which they can find their feet. The practices are not ones in which they feel at home, in which they can intelligibly take part. To return to Derrida, it is as if they are floundering in a language which does not feel like their own. This is the point at which, in order to enter into a form of life, they lay claim to an identity other than that assigned. It is crucial here that the claimed identity is captured by, expressed in terms of, a certain bodily morphology. Their desire for a certain position is expressed with reference to a certain bodily shape. This desire may not be one

which the shape of their actual anatomical body can carry, within a given social context. Consequently their current body image, instead of facilitating unthinking intentional engagement with the world, inhibits such a possibility. Their body thereby becomes unintelligible to themselves and rules out engaging in the world alongside others with the kind of shared intelligibility which makes life livable. What aspects of the body need to be changed so that it *can* be expressive of such possible agency, and enable such shared intelligibility, is a very local matter.

To sum up, the content of our subjectivity is captured by expressive bodily morphologies. There is a certain congruence in the salience which our body carries for ourselves and for others. Certain bodily shapes from the first-person and third-person perspective make appropriate certain kinds of activities and certain kinds of responses. With regard to their own body, these are just the kind of activities/responses with which the transsexual person cannot find their feet. The kind of practices with which they could find their feet (more) are expressed by a different bodily shape, (both first and third person). For the transsexual subject, therefore, the content of their own desire is captured with reference to a bodily form. To find themselves intelligible, and for others to find them so, requires a different bodily shape. The desire for body modification expressed by transsexual people can, then, be differentiated from other desires to modify our bodies, such as that found in many forms of cosmetic surgery. The desire for differently shaped breasts or noses is one which can only too intelligibly be expressed by those with female bodily forms in a variety of cultural settings. The wrongness of the transsexual body is not simply the failure to approximate to some valorized ideal. It is a wrongness which make someone's life unlivable by inhibiting intentional agency and shared forms of life.³⁹

In articulating the livability of bodily morphologies in relation to intelligible and local forms of life we must be careful to bear in mind that the expressiveness of our bodies remains both open and indeterminate. The expressive possibilities which can be carried by differently shaped bodies is subject to modification and change. Changes can only be successful, however, if the expressive content can be recognized, and appropriate responses are forthcoming. The disjuncture between the position claimed in local practices and the expressive possibilities of one's own body will not always make bodily modification the only option. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, 'the psycho-physiological equipment leaves a great variety

of possibilities open.⁴⁰ Explicit transgendered activism of the kind that Butler endorses, as well as lots of less obvious everyday activities, expand the expressive possibilities of differently shaped bodies. But for this to work such activism and activities have to take place in contexts in which they can be found intelligible. In other contexts body modification may be the only route to such intelligibility.

In this article I have offered an alternative to Butler's picture of the trans person as a gender outlaw challenging our public gender norms. It is replaced by a picture of people negotiating, often painfully, their place in everyday social interactions. The account has been informed by a view of gender not as an originary truth about us, but rather as a relatively gathered and local singularity to which we lay claim in an attempt to find our feet with each other.

Notes

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1. J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 58.
2. In this article I will be primarily using the term 'transsexual' for those people who seek bodily transformation via hormones or surgery.
3. J. Prosser, 'Exceptional Locations: Transsexual Travelogues', in K. More and S. Whittle, eds, *Reclaiming Gender: Transsexual Grammars at the fin de siècle*, Cassell, New York, 1999, pp. 83–117, p. 90; see also J. Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.
4. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1998, pp. 148–9.
5. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 81.
6. For further discussion of the problems with this picture see R. Alsop, A. Fitzsimons and K. Lennon, *Theorizing Gender*, Polity, Oxford, 2002, ch. 9: 'Borderlands and Gendered Homes'.
7. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York and London, 1990.
8. S. Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto', in K. Conboy, N. Medina and S. Stanbury, eds, *Writings on the Body*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, pp. 351–2.
9. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 29.
10. Ibid., p. 3.
11. Butler discusses the lives and deaths of Brandon Teena, Gloria Araujo and Venus Xtravaganza: see *Undoing Gender*, p. 251. See also *Paris is Burning*, dir. Jenny Livingston, Miramax, 1990.
12. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 2.
13. Ibid., pp. 3–4.
14. I am grateful to Lawrence Nixon for stressing this distinction between Butler and Wittgenstein. For extended discussion of this point see his Ph.D. thesis, 'Difference and Understanding: Wittgenstein and Judith Butler', University of Hull, 2006.
15. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 21.
16. *Guardian*, 18 March 2006. This is an edited extract from Norah Vincent, *Self-Made Man: My Year Disguised as a Man*, Atlantic Books, London, 2006. This is a useful description of the kind of practices I have in mind, though overall I think the project of the book was problematic.
17. Ibid.
18. E. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 109.
19. J. Morris, *Conundrum*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1974, p. 174.
20. R.N. Lancaster and M. di Leonardo, *The Gender Sexuality Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.
21. J. Prosser, 'A Palinode on Photography and the Transsexual Real', *Autobiographical Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1999, p. 85.
22. J. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. P. Mensah, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998.
23. G. Bennington, 'Double Tonguing: Derrida's Monolingualism', www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/bennington.html, pp. 1–2.
24. Ibid., p. 11.
25. Halberstam, in Z.I. Nataf, *Lesbians Talk Transgender*, Scarlett Press, London, 1996, p. 56.
26. G. Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, p. 5.
27. Nataf, *Lesbians Talk Transgender*, p. 24.
28. L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1967, p. 376.
29. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, p. 186.
30. Ibid., pp. 185, 186.
31. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, pp. 567–9.
32. Further discussion of the nature of expression is found in K. Lennon, 'Natural Expressions', forthcoming.
33. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 98.
34. See Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon, 'Borderlands and Gendered Homes'.
35. J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, Methuen, London, 1969, p. 260.
36. F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 60.
37. M. Merleau-Ponty, 'The Child's Relation to Others', in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. Charles Iain Markmann, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p. 118.
38. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 332.
39. In cases of demands for cosmetic surgery I would suggest a further sense of body image is involved, in which the body is seen as an object, rather than as expressive, compared to an ideal object and found wanting. This kind of objectification and its distinction from body image, as I have described it, needs careful discussion but is outside the scope of this article. It is also the case that the boundaries here will not be clear-cut and there may be some cases of cosmetic surgery which fit the expressive model.
40. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 189.