

## Coming Out 'Trans-sexual': A Cultural Phenomenon with Theoretical Consequences

By Eliza Steinbock<sup>1</sup>

Do you have a *dickit*? Are you in a *reverse* or a *cross couple*? Have you met your *mixed gender* neighbor? Ever have a *genderfuck* porn star fantasy? These are just some of the creative terms and likely situations put forward by mounting numbers of English-language cultural products that advocate for the social recognition of a specifically *trans*-sexuality. This movement is about claiming the erotic rights, or the right to be erotic, of transfolk. To be clear, I am talking about the horizon of *trans* (mind the gap) *sexuality*, that is, the sexuality of trans people and those who love them.

The proffered vocabulary and images from transgender erotica and pornography helps us to rethink and reorganize the gender in our sexualities. Gay or lesbian sexuality differs from heterosexuality in the gender of its erotic choice, but trans-sexuality fucks with what it means to be a man or a woman. Lined up next to homo, hetero and bi-sexuality, trans-sexuality unnervingly points out the limitations of a sexuality defined by the gender of the one desired. And that can be hot. What is your sexual identity when you desire, love or find erotic someone whose gender isn't clearly defined by being male or female? Are you, then, a translover? Or, on the flipside, what does it mean to crave gay men if you have the history of a female-bodied person and the identity of a dude? Are you a different sort of gay guy, but gay nevertheless? These identity games, and conundrums, crop up with an alarming frequency when one takes seriously the desire for someone who is transsexual or transgendered, as well as transfolk's desire during transition.

Representing trans-sexuality becomes an even more difficult task than doing it because of the influential (and false) social fantasy that all trans desire is channeled into a self-involved process of gender transformation. This misunderstanding stems from the first set of interviews gender clinic doctor Harry Benjamin made with people requesting surgical changes to their genitals. These pioneering 'transsexuals' did not talk of an erotic sense of their bodies. It was supposed to be kept secret. Consequently, no other transwomen and transmen would thereafter. This was likely out of fear that they would not be diagnosed as transsexual but as a transvestite or homosexual and, therefore, kept from receiving surgery, rather than indicative of a total lack of erotic feeling accompanying pre-operative bodies. How then to shift the conversation from the terms of *transsexuality*, which suggests an erotic investment in one's transition, to *trans-sexuality*, which issues a demand for an erotic life beyond one's self and defies the social edicts that restrict sexuality to the terms of gender?

Pornographic representations have become not only one of the largest grossing industries, but also a key site for sexual identities and communities to become established. The porn and erotica format is currently serving the trans community by helping them expose their sexual desires – from their own perspective and with their own pleasure in mind – to a wider audience. The 2002 edition of *Best Transgender Erotica* put together by Hanne Blank and Raven Kaldera, two insiders from the trans community, is one of the first widely read books that opened a space for trans people to picture themselves as having sexual desire and to be erotic. With twenty-three contributions originating “in the trans community” the anthology was ground breaking for evidencing trans-sexuality. It used literary means to confront, and ultimately to counter, the stigmatized and disfigured images of trans desire.

Parallel to publication of trans-erotic fiction a veritable eruption of independent trans pornography, also predominately made by trans people, has been on the film festival circuit. The film and video work of Mirah-Soleil Ross (*Dysfunctional* 1997, *Tremblement de Chair* 2001), Tobaron Waxman (*True Spirit, how long has it been* 2001) and Oakie Treadwell (*Phineas Slipped* 2002, *Maggots and Men* 2009) are examples of the diverse visual interventions into the pornographic genre's narrow representations of gendered bodies. (1) These sexually charged visuals range from scenarios between real-time lovers, overgrown schoolboys and S/M aficionados. In most cases, trans people's genitals appear for the camera without any explanation. They are just as exciting as any other revealed organ one desires to stimulate. This forthright reclamation of the erotic potential for trans embodiment stands in stark contrast to the usual overexposure of trans bodies in mainstream porn, which freakifies 'she-males',

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'he-shes' and 'hermaphrodites.' Visual or literary, unfortunately trans-eroticism usually is deployed with dehumanizing consequences. This weights the burden of countering these kinds of representations all the more.

Just recently trans-curious and trans-sexual alike are presented with another treat of and treatise on trans-sexuality. This time editor M. Christian, who contributed to the first collection, gathers a whopping twenty-four stories under the title *Transgender Erotica: Trans Figures* (2006). The book's highly potent political and sexual impact comes through offering the reader a multiplicity of 'trans figures' who are, for instance, rock stars, best friends, homeless, porn stars, Israeli and Arab, rural, stealth, fantastical and part wolf; thereby exceeding and exploding expectations of what trans-sexuality looks like or can feel like. The range of trans characters aren't always pretty, rich, monstrous or marginal. This is gender variation in action. The undulating text of wide-ranging genres carries along the different sexes in transition with it. The subtitle truthfully announces what the book does deliver: erotic essays with "transgender" as a figure of change that also can be pleurably read as thoughtful pieces about the changing figures of transgender people.

The difference of *Trans Figures* and its video version sisters I mentioned before is most apparent in comparison with the traditional trans-focused porn that, as Blank and Kaldera say in their introduction, "hasn't given us erotic role models or even a notion of what our sexual possibilities might be like, it has only given us warped, grimy peep-show windows through which to gawk at the sideshow Half-and-Halves" (7). Most readers will be familiar with this kind of erotica that deploys transsexuality as a plot device that activates a horrifying surprise or enables wires to get humorously crossed, in short, what titillating things could happen when you blur the boundaries between male and female. These stories are usually a reflection of the author's all-to-common channeling of myths about transsexual people's anything goes sexuality or the mistakenly monolithic transsexual experience of loathing and lack of love. Unfortunately, these kinds of disfigurements are usually the only ones most non-transgendered people get to know. These are the trans figures that either function as the harbingers of radical change or the portents of destruction. Either way, they usually have to suffer and eventually die for all the sins of the gender system.

Porn is the underbelly of the dominant imagination. It comes from somewhere! And it also cycles back into mainstream culture, affecting the way people perceive the abstract, if everyday, concepts of gender and sexual difference. In popular cinema we can see this warped 'transsexual' figment of the Western imagination at play in the psycho serial killer character of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and in the sickening transsexual mystery woman in *The Crying Game* (1992). Trans figures have also provided the basis for gender-confusion in heterosexual comedy, such as a male seeking proximity to a desired female by cross-dressing in *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982). Like other misleadingly 'queer' characters in mainstream cinema, the use and abuse of trans figures reflects the fears and anxieties about gender difference present in the culture at large, rather than actual images of transfolk themselves. This is true even in some queer cinema articulations of transgender like in the Australian drag road movie *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) or in the American version *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), both of which conflate gay sexual desire to the misperceived trans desire for gender transformation.

The imagery of independent and community-inspired trans-porn inevitably responds to what is already 'in the air.' There might not be a one-to-one correspondence between say, *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Tremblement de Chair* (2001), but both take a sexual scene with a transwomen and a man where the penis is revealed. In the mainstream film, the man runs away and vomits, in the trans-made film (from nearly a decade later) the man grasps the penis and has a wonderful erotic time. Point made: porn is as much a battleground for (re-)education and social change as the justice system or any other kind of social institution.

Porn can also mark a personal war zone. Media theorist Richard Dyer has said that porn is one form of educating desire (1985). You know when you like it, or when you don't; and that can have a painful and/or pleasurable precision. One's desire for trans people can be confronting because it forces the scary question of "what does that make me?" I suggest understanding the explosion of trans-made pornographies as in part a response to the popular belief that holds trans love as impossible, such as in the narrative of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001).

Yet, we seem to be in the midst of a cultural transition. The blockbuster hit *Transamerica* (2005) provided insight and depth into one transwoman's experience, without anyone dying (!). And the HBO reality-TV series *TransGeneration* (2005) gives broad coverage on trans collegiate youth in the USA, which encourages the prevention of violence based on the fear of the unknown or uneasily categorized. In the Netherlands, the love story between sixty-somebodies, one of whom happened to be trans, in the touching documentary *Gewoon Liefde* (2006) recently screened on national television. The collection *Trans People in Love* (2008) by Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox made a splashing debut in the genre of trans people writing on real-time love, while another anthology on trans love, *Gendered Hearts* (editor Morty Diamond), is also due out in the next year. The supposed constraints of not having a place in the sexual order, especially when seen from a theoretical point of view, seem to be evaporating into thin air. This phenomenon of trans-sexuality clearly calls for sexuality and gender studies to regroup and offer more up-to-date versions of their theories that can account for their kind of passion. It is looking more and more complicated to simply put the 'T' on LGB when trans-loving puts traditional ways of describing sexual orientation based on gender identity into question.

In coming out of the normative gender closet, these most recent erotic writings and images demand not only an adequate way of theoretically accounting for them, but also an audience and their seeming impossible place in the sexual spectrum. Still today, many transfolk are afraid to be honest about their transsexual desires because of how it would complicate their sexual lives. The looming question for them is, "who will love me then?" It is a matter of life and death that such love, perhaps the latest "love that dare not speak its name," be spoken loud and clear. May we name this proud love trans-sexuality?

Undoubtedly, like any other loosely grouped set of people, the trans community houses a diverse range of sexualities. This is an entire spectrum of desire to explore through the representational mediums. Collections, such as *Best Transgender Erotica*, and videos such as *Doing it Ourselves: The Trans Women Porn Project* (2010) house a colorful expansion of these spectra first called for by Sandy Stone in her 1992 "Posttranssexual Manifesto." They are best understood as a part of the wave of trans-sexual visibility contributed to by the work of trans academics, activists, writers and image-makers. In the Netherlands this work is carried out by many dedicated people in groups like The T-Image Foundation, who are responsible for five editions of the Netherlands Transgender Film Festival and T3 Conferences, as well as the local Noodle group, "a queer collective for the diversity and freedom of gender, sex and sexuality," who organize a monthly café, a radio show and demonstrations. (2) In alignment with such political culture work for trans visibility, education and community carried out by these groups, transporn brings fresh voices to the pleasure dome and excellent erotic scenes, none of which, thankfully, end in vomiting. They show how far the trans movement has come to cum.

## Notes

1. More trans-erotic independent films include *Linda/Les and Annie: The first female-to-male transsexual love story* (1989 Annie Sprinkle, Al Jaccoma, Johnny Armstrong), *The Look of Love* (1996 Charles Lofton), *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998 Del Lagrace Volcano and Hans Scheirl), *Alley of the Tranny Boys* (1998 Christopher Lee and J. Zapata), *Dandy Dust* (1998 Hans Scheirl), *Sex Flesh in the Blood* (1999 Christopher Lee), *I.K.U.* (2000 Shu Lea Cheang), *Madame Lauraine's Transsexual Touch* (2001 Mirah-Soleil Ross, Monica Forrester, Viviane Namaste), *Full Load: Scenes from ssspread.com* (2002 Barbara deGenevieve), *Pornograflics "Housewifey"* (2003 Dirty Pillows Inc. Angela Phong), *Pull In* (2003 Eliza Steinbock), *Trannyfags* (2004 Morty Diamond), *Enough Man* (2005 Luke Woodward), *Cubbyholes: Transmen in Action*, (2007 Prince Warren, M. Van Helsing & Chopper Pierce), *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Will* (2008 Morty Diamond).

2. For more information on T-Image see [www.transgenderfilmfestival.com](http://www.transgenderfilmfestival.com) and for the Noodles group check [www.n00dles.nl](http://www.n00dles.nl). See also the upcoming festival "TranScreen" being organized to take place in Spring of 2011, <http://transcreen.wordpress.com/>.