

# Making the Lives of Transsexual People Visible: Addressing the Politics of Social Erasure

At our recent convention, the New Socialist Group decided to expand our basis of unity (see "Our Politics" on our website) to include the struggles of transgendered, transsexual, and intersexed people. In the interests of beginning discussion on these struggles and what they entail for those of us fighting for socialism from below in the pages of *New Socialist*, Clarice Kuhling and Gary Kinsman interviewed Viviane Namasté, a transsexual activist and author of *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). This book is an important examination of how social institutions and theoretical approaches have led to the erasure of transsexual and transgendered experiences and begins to counter this through developing research and a detailed analysis of the forms of marginalization and oppression facing transsexual and transgendered people. Viviane Namasté teaches at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University in Montréal. We hope this interview begins a process of discussion of these questions in *New Socialist*.

**NS: Why did you title your book "Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People"?**

Most of the academic approaches to transsexuality argue that transsexuals are produced by the medical and the psychiatric establishment. Alternatively, they use the case of transsexuality to illustrate the social construction of gender. There are all kinds of examples of this type of scholarship, and unfortunately, it does not appear that things are about to change in the near future. There are a couple of things that need to be unpacked in this type of work. Firstly, this work is always, and only, about identity. It limits itself to how and why transsexuals decide to live as members of the "opposite sex." Or it uses transsexuals to speak about the relations between social norms and gender identity. So what is left out of academic accounts of transsexuality is any real understanding of what everyday life is like for transsexuals. This erasure is also reflected in the terminology used. While the term "transgender" is currently one of the most popular terms used, it needs to be pointed out that at this point in history, and increasingly, transsexuals object to being included under the catch-all phrase of "transgender." They argue that the health care and social service needs of transsexuals are quite specific, and that this specificity is lost when people use a vague "transgender." So while critics are churning out books, articles, and essays on transsexuals and the transgendered, they have nothing to say about

the very real circumstances in which transsexuals live. I cannot offer us even a tiny piece of information about transsexuals and the law, or access to health care, or the struggles that transsexuals have with employment, or the situation of transsexuals in prison. So my book begins with a critique of this kind of intellectual work. And I argue that, if we actually do some empirical research on some of the matters most pressing for transsexuals—civil status, access to health care, decriminalization of prostitution, abusive police practices—we discover that transsexuals are quite literally shut out and excluded from the institutional world. They do not have access to many kinds of services, such as shelters for battered women. And so I begin with this empirical data and I raise the questions with respect to theory. In the first instance I argue that the theories concerned with the production of transsexuality have got it wrong: transsexuals are not, in point of fact, produced by the medical and psychiatric institution. Rather, they are continually erased from the institutional world—shut out from its programmes, excluded from its terms of reference. And the second question I raise comes out of this reflection: inquire about the relevance of writing theory which cannot make sense of the everyday world, and which actually contributes to the very invisibility of transsexuality that a critical theory needs to expose. This is part of a much broader debate in the university, especially within the social sciences, about the role and function of an intellectual. And I argue that theory and university scholarship erase transsexuals in much the same way as different institutional practices, then they are really part of the problem that needs to be understood, and are not at all part of any critical inquiry.

**NS: What are some of the institutional forms of discrimination and oppression that transsexual and transgender people face in patriarchal capitalist societies?**

There are a variety of forms of discrimination. Access to services is one of the major barriers: detoxification programmes, especially, state funding for surgery, access to hormones in prison, access to emergency shelter. Much of this access is dependent on the individual attitudes of service providers. When someone is uneducated about transsexuals and transvestites, they may refuse access to services based on misinformation or prejudice. Another type of discrimination comes out of a total lack of institutional policies for transsexuals. This is especially true for female-to-male transsexuals. In these instances, some people cannot get services because bureaus

crats do not have a clear written directive. Access to the media is a whole other form of institutional discrimination. Transsexuals are required to give their autobiography on demand: "How long have you known? Are you operated? How did your family take the news?" These kinds of personal questions can provide some insight into the lives of transsexuals, but they are also, in a sense, quite invasive. It is astounding to me that within 15 seconds of knowing an individual is transsexual, some people feel comfortable enough to ask transsexuals to describe the physical appearance and sexual function of their genitals. How is it that cultural taboos regarding speaking openly about sexuality and genitalia with people you do not know well go out the window when it comes to transsexuals? One of the effects of this demand is that it is difficult for transsexuals to address the real issues: cops who harass street prostitutes and escorts, access to health care and social services, changing one's name and sex.

The other thing with respect to access to the media is the whole affiliation with lesbian/gay and feminist communities. Most of the self-designated activists emerge from lesbian/and/or feminist communities, and they express themselves. frame the issues in these terms. While this may make sense for those transsexuals who understand their lives in these terms, it does not speak to the transsexuals who do not make sense of their lives, and their political struggles, within the confines of a lesbian/gay framework. This means that transsexuals who do not make sense of their lives according to a lesbian/gay framework have no voice. And I emphasize that based on my empirical research and observations within the milieu for more than 10 years, the majority of transsexuals do not make sense of their lives and do not articulate their needs in lesbian /gay terms. Yet we never hear these voices. And even though we have some empirical research which challenges an equation amongst transsexuals and lesbians/gays—I refer here to my

## Glossary of Terms:

**Gender:** refers to the roles, behaviour, and meanings assigned by society to women and men based on their presumed biological sex, although often having nothing to do with questions of biology. In western societies it is generally held to be the case that there are only two genders—women and men.

**Sex:** refers to the presumed biological and anatomical attributes of females and males. In western societies, it is generally held that there are only two sexes, despite a significant number of people who do not easily fit into these two categories. Some have argued that sex, like gender, is also socially constructed and historically specific.

**Transsexual:** individuals born in one sex—male or female—but who identify as members of the "opposite" sex. They may take hormones and undergo surgical intervention, usually including the genitals, to live as members of their chosen sex. Transsexuals are both male-to-female and female-to-male.

**Transgender:** an umbrella term, which has emerged from the Anglo-American lesbian and gay community, to include all kinds of people whose gendered self-presentation (expressed through mannerisms, dress, and even physiology) does not correspond to the behaviours associated with the members of their biological sex. This would include, for instance, transsexuals, drag queens (men who perform as women on stage only, usually in a gay male club or social environment), intersexed individuals (people who are born with genitals that cannot be easily classified as "male" or "female"), drag kings (females who perform as men on the stage in lesbian cultural spaces), transvestites (heterosexual males who cross-dress in "women's" clothes and who receive sexual gratification from this act), as well as people who do not identify with either the category "male" or "female".

**Essentialism:** refers to the practice of ascribing inherent or necessary properties (an essence) to objects or people—in particular, ascribing certain behaviours, attitudes, and roles as inherent to being female/women and male/men. Many theorists have been critical of such approaches/practices and have argued that they serve to reinforce and justify sexual and gender discrimination and oppression.

**Social Constructionism:** refers to the view that the institutions or categories we use to divide up and understand the world are not pre-existing in nature, but continually (re)invented or developed by people throughout history. For instance, it is sometimes argued that a binary (two) sex/gender system is a social construction and can therefore be disrupted and replaced with something different.

research as well as that of Henry Rubin, whose book on female-to-male transsexuals, *Self-Made Men*, will be published by Vanderbilt University Press in 2003—our research and observations are ignored both by critics in queer theory as well as by transgendered activists who align themselves with queer politics. So to return to the notion of institutions, transsexuals experience discrimination to the extent that they cannot express themselves in their own terms. The last institutional barrier I want to cite is that of consultation. So often, the government develops policies without consulting transsexuals at all. Or in certain cases, consultation happens with middle-class non-prostitute transsexuals, who represent their unique interests without ensuring that the broader needs of transsexuals are addressed.

**NS:** Could you tell us a bit about the struggles of transsexuals in Quebec and the institutional relations they are up against when trying to get their "sex" changed on official documents?

Legally, Québec is a civil code jurisdiction, and within civil code jurisdictions, the body is legally inscribed as a matter of public order. This is quite different than the legal situation within a common law jurisdiction. What this means practically, in terms of name and sex change, is that transsexuals can only change their name after surgical intervention on the genitals. This legal framework is quite specific to civil code countries, and goes back to a long legacy of the Napoleonic Code. In terms of everyday life, this creates all kinds of problems: a female individual begins to take hormones, lives as a man without detection, but their identity documents remain in the female name. Getting employment, access to health care, and everyday situations like picking up a registered letter from the post office become very problematic. The situation is especially complicated for female-to-male transsexuals. The Office of Civil Status will clearly state that a male-to-female transsexual must undergo a vaginoplasty, the construction of the vagina, in order to change their name and sex. Yet in the case of female-to-male transsexuals, they invoke a rather vague criterion of structurally changing the genital organs. They do not say if this means a phalloplasty (the construction of a penis), or if it refers to the removal of the uterus and the ovaries alongside a double mastectomy and taking male hormones. So things are not at all clear and my research indicates that there is no standardized procedure in this area. Just recently, a court ruled that a male-to-female transgendered person can add a female name to their birth certificate. It will be interesting to see what kind of impact this has for transsexuals in Québec, and if the access will be universal.

**NS:** What is the significance of the challenge to the two-gender dichotomous (male/female) system that transgendered and transsexual people raise? How can radical activists

who are not transsexual or transgendered take up this critique of gender relations in the daily work that they do?

This question is one that comes up again and again on the left. I am happy to have the opportunity to answer it, in a sense to undo this question, because it helps to illustrate some of the issues that I have raised in my previous answers. Let me begin by briefly summarizing some of the underlying assumptions of this question. The question follows a line advanced by some self-designated transgendered activists and repeated over and over again by queer theorists in the university. It argues that the binary sex/gender system, the exclusive division of the world into "men" and "women" is oppressive. And this argument further contends that this is oppressive not only to transsexuals, but indeed to men and women who consider themselves "properly" sexed and gendered. And having made this critique of the binary sex/gender system, this position then goes on to state that social change can happen through some kind of disruption or displacement of the sex/gender system. That's where transgendered people come in, located within this framework as those who successfully challenge the status quo and point out a new way of going forward. Now, having given a brief overview of what I see as some of the underlying assumptions of the question, let me return to the division I made earlier between "transsexuals" and "transgendered". I said that more and more, a lot of transsexuals take a critical distance from the term "transgendered". And this question allows us an opportunity to think through why. The question assumes that "transgendered" people will see their bodies, identities, and lives as part of a broader process of social change, of disrupting the sex/gender binary. Now many transgendered people make such an argument: you can read it in the works of Leslie Feinberg, Riki Ann Wilchins, or Kate Bornstein. But many transsexuals do not see themselves in these terms. They would situate themselves as "men" and as "women", not as "gender radicals" or "gender revolutionaries" or "boyzzz" or "grrrrrrls". Most transsexuals I know, and most I have interviewed, describe themselves as men or women. And there is a sense in which this position cannot be understood in relation to the question posed, "what is the significance of the challenge to the two-gender dichotomous system that transsexual/transgendered people raise?" because transsexuals seek to have a different embodied position within that system. I hope it is clear here what I am trying to do—hope to show how asking the question in this way forces transsexuals to speak a language that is foreign to us. And while it may have meaning and relevance for transgendered people, it has very little to do with the everyday lives of transsexuals.

Now it is usually assumed, in the university and even in progressive movements for social change, that people who adopt "essentialist" positions are not politically progressive. But you know, I think that the interest in social constructionism in the Anglo-American university is in danger of blinding people to

the very good political work that one can do from an essentialist position. And I will go out on a limb here—because to be a good thinker and activist and teacher means taking some risks—and I will say that in the case of transsexuals, essentialism has such a bad name! Let me cite an example to help illustrate my case. It is so often assumed, that in disrupting a binary sex/gender system, transgendered people are in the forefront of social change. I cited the works of Leslie Feinberg and Riki Ann Wilchins earlier. Both of these writers are located within this framework: they advocate a “transgendered” revolution. Now, this is supposed to be a position that is so much more sophisticated than those terrible essentialist transsexuals. And the position advocated by Feinberg and Wilchins is the one cited by critics in queer theory. These are the authors who make it onto the course outlines of university studies. And it is all done by well-intentioned, well-meaning teachers who would situate themselves as allies of transsexuals.

But let us examine in more depth some of the political work of Feinberg and Wilchins. Wilchins has been not only active, but instrumental, in lobbying for the de-listing of gender identity disorder from the manual of psychiatrists, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV*. And Feinberg also supports such a position, notably in publishing the “International Bill of Gender Rights” in her book. This Bill also contends that gender identity disorder has no place in the psychiatric diagnostic manual. If such a lobby is successful, it will mean that it will be impossible to pay for sex reassignment surgery either through a private insurance company or through state/provincial health insurance. In this light, the activism of Wilchins and Feinberg supports the privatization of health care.

So here we have a case of some transgendered activists, influenced by social constructionist theory, who argue that they are the cutting edge of social change. Yet they are involved in political work which is deeply conservative. Now let us contrast this with the work of some transsexuals like Margaret O’Hartigan, who has been instrumental in ensuring that sex reassignment surgery is paid for through state health insurance in Minnesota, and who has offered a trenchant critique of the funding of health care services in Oregon, including services for transsexuals. Now, O’Hartigan is an essentialist: she is not making any claims to disrupting the sex/gender binary; she is not hailing herself as the new vanguard of third wave feminism. What she is doing is the highly unglamorous work of research, lobbying, and activism to ensure that all transsexuals can have access to health care, regardless of their economic or financial resources. So here we have an example of an essentialist (gasp!) who is, in my opinion, doing some excellent political work. So I hope it is clear, then, how the question posed to me contains all kinds of assumptions that I do not accept. And so one of the things I hope to do is to encourage people to be deeply critical of the kinds of information and knowledge available on transsexuals, perhaps especially the knowledge advocated by “transgendered” people. In practical terms, this means reading more than Leslie Feinberg, Riki Ann Wilchins, Kate Bornstein, or Judith Butler.

That being said, and in a critical spirit of solidarity, I would encourage people in the labour movement and in progressive circles to openly critique the “party line” when it comes to transsexuals and transgendered people. Feinberg and Wilchins and many others like them are invested and implicated in precisely the forms of economic and global capitalism that progressive people seek to understand and transform. You know, I think in the past 5 years, transgendered people have become so trendy. And sometimes I have a feeling that in part because of this trendiness, people are afraid to criticize what transgendered people say because they don’t want to be called “transphobic”. Don’t get stuck there: some transgendered people are involved in regressive political work and it needs to be denounced.

I want to say two more things before concluding. Firstly, I want to encourage people to learn about what is going on here in Canada. Transsexuals have such a rich history in Canada and Québec, and prostitutes have been the first ones to organize to get services for transsexuals—in Montréal, in Vancouver, and in Toronto. Yet so much of the writing in English on transgendered people is produced by Americans. By studying how transsexuals have organized here in Canada, we can reframe some of the questions that people ask. I think it is most useful to think about these questions not in terms of the individual rights of transsexuals, but in terms of how these issues link with those of other marginalized populations, or with the functioning of the state in general. And I think that leftists can play a very important role in this regard. I am thinking, for instance, of a panel that Trish Salah organized around labour and prostitution at the “Sexin’ Change” conference in October 2001 in Toronto. Prostitute activist Kara Gillis actually noted that this was one of the first times she had been invited to a specifically union/labour context, despite the fact that her activism frames prostitution as work. So organizing these kinds of events allows people to make broader connections and shifts the focus from a narrow one of “transsexual rights”. Prostitute activist Mirha-Soleil Ross argued that day, for instance, that the decriminalization of prostitution would have a more positive impact on the lives of most transsexuals than any kind of human rights legislation. So that is something progressive people can do: integrate transsexual activists into your work not to speak about gender and transsexuality, but to make broader links concerning the regulation of marginalized people.★

#### Some Sources Cited

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