

TRANSGENDER AND LANGUAGE

A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for the Future

Don Kulick

At some very basic level, globalization and transnationalism—the themes of this special issue of *GLQ*—imply both a crossing or dissolving of borders and, therefore, a heightened concern, on the part of some, to reassert them. The transgressive and anxiety-inducing quality of transnationalism is a characteristic shared by a range of other social phenomena, two of which are transgenderism and language. One of the many things that transgenderism “does” in social and cultural life is affirm the permeability of gendered boundaries. By doing so, it highlights the contrived, contingent, and contextualized nature of “male” and “female.” As for language—deconstructive theory, Bakhtinian translinguistics, and Deleuzo-guattarian pragmatics have insistently and powerfully demonstrated that it is always in excess of the efforts of linguists to freeze its flows, contain its variation, and delineate it into abstracted, homogeneous systems. The transgression of limits is language’s inescapable nature. Language is inherently unruly, deterritorializing, unchained. But it is also continually subject to attempts—by linguists, grammarians, “language mavens” like William Safire or George Will, and everyone who has opinions about “good” and “bad” language (which is to say, everyone)—to deny or resist that unruliness; to keep it in check, under control, in bounds.¹

Partly because issues of transgender and language bear a thematic relationship to many of the topics discussed by other contributors to this issue of *GLQ*, and partly because there have been, to date, no consistent treatments of the relationship between transgender and language, this essay will review the published literature on transgender and language and offer suggestions about directions in which future research might usefully proceed.²

Before I begin, however, a confession: When I began reading the literature on transgendered language, I was startled. “Oh God,” I thought at first, with a

sinking feeling, “Janice Raymond was right.” Janice Raymond, of course, is the author of the highly influential (and inflammatory) book *The Transsexual Empire*. Raymond’s book has the great merit of being one of the first to insist that transsexualism is analyzable as a social phenomenon, and not just as an individual pathology.³ Unfortunately, though, the value of that insight is tarnished in her book by her bitter attacks on transsexuals, whom she clearly resents and dislikes. Raymond’s view of transsexuals is an easy one to summarize: transsexuals are rear-guard soldiers for the patriarchy. They “reinforc[e] the fabric by which a sexist society is held together” by “exchang[ing] one stereotype for the other.”⁴

This unnuanced understanding of transsexualism has been contested by transsexuals for decades, most elegantly in Sandy Stone’s retort “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto.” It is clearly inadequate for comprehending such a complex social phenomenon, and its continued circulation in some feminist writing is more an expression of bigotry than of thoughtful analysis.⁵

Imagine my surprise, then, when I began reading the literature on transgenderism and language and discovered that Raymond’s accusations seemed completely borne out. Regardless of who was writing—it didn’t matter if the authors were phonologists, linguists, logopedic therapists, or transsexuals—everyone, it seemed to me initially, was possessed by the succubus of the linguist Robin Lakoff, in an earlier incarnation, specifically her early-1970s one, when she wrote her flawed classic *Language and Woman’s Place*. And those who had managed to exorcise Robin had simply gone from the frying pan into the fire to transmogrify into Deborah Tannen, in her spooky *You Just Don’t Understand* avatar.⁶

For the fact is that the bulk of what is written on transgenderism and language relies on both those books as statements of fact about the way women’s and men’s language “is.” The decades of criticism of Lakoff’s early work and the frosty reception given Tannen’s book by feminist linguists have gone unnoticed here. In this literature, *Language and Woman’s Place* and *You Just Don’t Understand* are bibles. They are the sources of authority for claims made about the way in which women and men talk and, hence, about what transsexuals ought to do to sound more like a woman or a man. Based on the claims that Lakoff and Tannen make about “women’s language,” for example, male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals are encouraged (and they encourage one another) to use more tag questions (i.e., questions appended to the end of statements, like “This is silly, isn’t it?”) and what Lakoff calls “empty adjectives” like *lovely* and *precious*.⁷ They are also advised to develop a “greater willingness to listen” and not interrupt; to move their mouth more (“When women talk they move their mouths more than men”); and to smile more: the Swedish speech therapist Ewa Söderpalm informs us that

“women smile more and have many more encouraging nods. Men smile most when they are trying to fool you!”⁸ Female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals are told that the “adoption of a certain aggressive style” and telling people what they want, instead of asking for it, will help them pass as men.⁹

At first glance, these kinds of facile contrasts between “women’s” and “men’s” language give the impression that this literature is directed as much at transsexual men as it is at transsexual women. However, just as books like *You Just Don’t Understand* appear targeted at women more than men and are, as far as we can tell, read much more widely by women than by men,¹⁰ a closer look at the literature on transgenderism and language reveals a significant imbalance. The overwhelming bulk of writing on transgenderism and language is concerned with the language of transsexual women. In books and articles by and about transsexual men, language issues are virtually nonexistent.

Speech and language are a serious and continual concern for MTFs—phonetician Deborah Günzburger goes so far as to say that for some MTFs, a preoccupation with language “verg[es] on obsession.” No academic discussion of MTFs and their needs is complete without a word about language. An early discussion by Deborah Feinbloom is typical in the genre. “For the male to female transsexual, the voice is of particular importance,” Feinbloom explains, “since without retraining it tends to remain deep and is potentially disruptive to the new image being presented. Talking in a whisper, in a falsetto, or learning to change the pitch is often crucially important.” Articles by physicians and counselors who work with MTFs agree. Mildred Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley, in their recent book *True Selves*, explain that “for most MTF transsexuals, considerable time and effort is necessary to train their voices—even the way they cough and clear their throat—to become as gender appropriate as possible in register, pitch, inflection, and intonation.” Ewa Söderpalm has written an entire monograph on “transsexualism in a logopedic perspective,” in which “transsexualism” means “male-to-female transsexualism” and in which she explains to speech therapists what they ought to know in order to help MTF transsexuals sound like women. And anthropologist Anne Bolin, in her ethnographic study of American transsexuals, stresses the importance of speech modifications, noting that many MTF transsexuals participate in voice workshops or logopedic therapy, where they learn “pointers on articulation, pitch, rhythm, word choice, etc.”¹¹

Concern about speech also appears in the autobiographies of transsexual women. Many mention their concern that their speech might betray them in situations where they wanted to be seen as women.¹² Others are more expansive. Claudine Griggs discusses how she “practiced for years to alter [her] voice to emulate

women.” Renée Richards recounts that when she began to appear in public as a woman,

I tried to make my voice feminine. . . . I had resigned myself to [my voice’s] rough-edged quality; what I practiced . . . was introducing variations of tone into it. I had noticed that men, including myself, tended to klunk along inside a very narrow range whereas women’s voices fluctuated more readily between highs and lows. I tried to acquire this extra dimension without going overboard and sounding like a campy transvestite. There is also a difference in the way that women pronounce their s’s, with slightly more sibilance than a man; I worked on that too.¹³

In stark contrast to this kind of focused attention on language, the literature on, by, and for transsexual men contains few references to speech or language. Lou Sullivan’s classic handbook *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual* contains the most extensive section I have encountered on “your voice,” and that consists only of five short paragraphs. But Sullivan’s advice is directed not at transsexuals but at “the pre-hormonal female-to-male or the female-to-male transvestite or crossdresser.” Holly Devor’s recent seven-hundred-page magnum opus on FTMs contains no index entries for *speech*, *voice*, or *language*—omissions that would be unthinkable in a corresponding book on male-to-female transsexuals. Like Sullivan, Devor treats FTM language as a completely unproblematic dimension of a woman’s transition to manhood. A similar nonchalance occurs in the published autobiographies of FTM transsexuals. Raymond Thompson, for example, mentions speech only in passing as one attribute among several that made him seem masculine. Explaining that once he began hormone therapy, people who met him assumed that he was a man, Thompson remarks that “with my deep voice and moustache and dungarees they had no reason to think any differently.” Mario Martino mentions speech in a similarly undramatic manner: “Masculinization had begun and escalated with the hormones”; he notes, simply, “My voice was deepening, my stubbly beard had to be shaved daily.”¹⁴

The reason given in the literature for this lack of concern about FTM speech is physiological: the ingestion of testosterone thickens the vocal cords and deepens the voice of transsexual men.¹⁵ This is different from transsexual women—estrogen has no effect on their vocal chords, which means that their pitch level remains low. The fact that the pitch level of the voices of FTMs falls within the range of what is generally considered masculine means that FTMs on hormones “are lucky,” as Lou Sullivan expresses it.¹⁶ They don’t have to worry about their speech.

However, as the lush plurality of advice to female transsexuals indicates, a properly gendered voice is not only about pitch (indeed, one clinical article asserts that even surgery, which some MTFs undergo to shorten their vocal cords, “does not obviate the need for speech therapy in almost all cases”). Speaking as a woman involves a mastery of a wide range of skills that encompass not only pitch and intonation but also lexicon, syntax, paralinguistic behavior such as speaking softly (Jennifer Anne Stevens informs her readers that “generally, soft-spoken women are more acceptable in today’s society than loud mouths, especially particularly low-pitched loud mouths”), and nonverbal behavior, such as moving one’s mouth more, looking others directly in the eyes when speaking, and smiling and nodding encouragingly.¹⁷

For this reason, the absence of literature advising FTMs how to talk like men is an ideological fact as much as it is a physiological one, and it deserves more research for what it tells us about ideas and practices of masculinity and femininity. It both reflects and invokes widespread cultural attitudes that hold that being a man is self-evident, whereas being a woman is a complicated set of procedures that require careful adherence to detailed, explicit instructions (often issued by men) about how to walk, talk, sit, eat, dress, move, and display affect. It is also consistent with the interesting fact that whereas FTMs generally solicit few surgical interventions to become men (most have only mastectomies, and perhaps liposuction around their buttocks and hips), many MTF transsexuals spend years returning to surgeons to undergo a large number of procedures and operations, including breast augmentation, lip augmentation, face-lifts, rhinoplasty, chin reduction, jaw realignment, brow shaves, cheek implants, false rib removal, chemical peeling, tracheal shaving, and vocal cord surgery.¹⁸ Being a man, both in cultural models and in transsexual practice, seems easy. Being a woman requires effort, advice, and help.

It was this neat alignment between cultural assumptions and transsexual practices that made me think of Janice Raymond’s thesis, which undoubtedly has some validity here. Anne Bolin reminds us, for example, in language that would warm Raymond’s heart, that transsexuals who spend a lot of time learning to enunciate and use stereotypically women’s language “are not participating in a feminist revolution; they simply want to pass.”¹⁹

Even granted the conservative dimension of all this, however, it would be relatively easy to argue that even when transsexual women do manage to speak like ladies, they are not simply (or not only) “reinforcing the fabric by which a sexist society is held together.”²⁰ If Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler have taught us anything, it is that mimesis and repetition—or citationality, which seems the most

appropriate word in this case—are not simple reproductions of already existing language, or already existing social relations. Every citation is an alteration, since it occurs in a different temporal structure, a different location, a different social context, a different body. This means that the adoption of stereotypical speech norms by transgendered individuals, even if this in some sense can be said to reaffirm stereotypes, also opens a conceptual space for an appreciation that those speech norms *are* stereotypes—stylized repetitions that help produce the appearance of appropriately sexed corporeality. In the spirit of Butler's analysis of drag, we could argue that the transsexual adoption of "women's language" or "men's language" demonstrates precisely the phantasmic nature of those very constructs.²¹ Indeed, that "men's language" and "women's language" can be appropriated by transgendered individuals is the most powerful evidence I can think of that those labels themselves are hopelessly inadequate, theoretically impoverished, and conceptually sterile.

In addition to all this, there is some evidence that at least some transsexual women are not terribly interested in passing as ladies. In discussing herself as a "gender outlaw," Kate Bornstein, for example, explicitly mentions language. "At voice lessons," she recalls,

I was taught to speak in a very high pitched, very breathy, sing-song voice and to tag questions onto the end of each sentence. And I was supposed to smile all the time when I was talking. And I said, "Oh, I don't want to talk like that!" The teachers assumed that you were going to be a heterosexual woman. No one was going to teach you to be a lesbian because lesbian was as big an outlaw as transsexual.²²

By explicitly calling attention to the fact that "women's language" is implicated in normative heterosexuality, Bornstein makes visible a blind spot that has remained largely unperceived during twenty years of research on language and gender. She reminds us of the role that language plays in the constitution of sexuality, and her comments imply a research agenda that queer linguists are only now beginning to pursue.

Aside from the literature on how transsexuals ought to talk, another kind of literature on transgenderism and language is that which discusses terminology and classifications. Transgender activists love to coin words, and transgender newsletters, magazines, and Internet groups bristle with debates about names, labels, and pronouns. Even though it is by now fairly well established, the pros and cons of the

term *transgender* are still being vigorously debated.²³ Other words that have been invented and debated include Riki Anne Wilchins's *gendertrash*, *spokesherm*, and *genderqueer* and the pronouns *hir* (pronounced "here") and *s/he* ("shu-he") that some transgendered individuals prefer.²⁴ And even if their categorizations of people into *femisexuals*, *masculosexuals*, *transhomosexuals*, and so on never catch on, those terms, coined by Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox, display a talent for linguistic creativity that is increasingly being exploited by transgendered individuals and that cries out for attention and research.²⁵

Linguistic creativity seems to be a fundamental characteristic of much queer language. The outrageous queenly insults transcribed by Stephen O. Murray, the much-debated use of feminine pronouns by gay men to denote themselves and other men, and the irrepressible neologistic zeal of lesbian feminist writers like Mary Daly are rich testimonies to some of the responses that queers might offer in answer to Humpty Dumpty's question "Who's to be master?"²⁶ Only recently, however, have scholars begun to turn to the ways in which transgendered individuals wield their languages' grammatical system to help constitute their own subjectivities and desires.

Sometimes, of course, transgendered individuals are able to do no such thing. Consider, for example, Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite made famous by Michel Foucault.²⁷ Classified and socialized as a girl, Barbin lived as a female until a church confession about her passion for another girl set in motion a series of examinations that had her legally reclassified as a man at age twenty-one. Nine years later Barbin committed suicide. Vincent Crapanzano has recently presented a rereading of Barbin's memoirs, in which he argues that a profound tragedy of Barbin's life was that it exceeded contemporary language's capacity to provide her with a vantage point, an identity. "Barbin's life can be understood in terms of the loss of a genre," Crapanzano writes, "the loss of those conventionalized discourse strategies by which a man (or woman) of Barbin's provincial, bourgeois background could 'meaningfully' articulate his (her) life." By exploring the interlocutory structure of Barbin's text (i.e., the relations between the narrating I[s] and the narrated I[s]), the use of grammatical tense, and the way in which conventional genre conventions are deployed, Crapanzano argues that the interventions of the priests, the doctors, and the law pushed Barbin beyond narrative, beyond the means through which s/he might make sense of her/his past or her/his life. All Barbin was left with, in the end, was "the horror of being deprived of any story whatsoever."²⁸

The linguistic constraints imposed on transgendered individuals are something that I have examined in my own research among transgendered prostitutes in

northern Brazil. In that work I have explored how speakers are both constrained by grammar and how they creatively manipulate and upset those constraints in self- and other reference.²⁹ The most widespread word for their particular subjectivity is *travesti*, a word that is grammatically masculine in Portuguese (*o travesti*). Whenever *travestis* use that word to speak generally about *travestis* as a group, they seem shepherded by grammar to use masculine forms—like *ele* [he] and masculine articles and adjectival endings—that agree with *travesti*. Most *travestis*, however, rarely use the word *travesti*, preferring instead the grammatically feminine words *bicha* and *mona* to talk about themselves and their colleagues. And even if a *travesti* uses the word *travesti* to talk about *travestis* generally, she will nevertheless always switch to feminine forms to speak about individual, named *travestis*, unless she wishes a gross insult to be inferred.³⁰

Travestis also use language as a way of ensnaring their clients in the oppressive realities of Brazilian ideas about gender. In order to coerce more money from a client, *travestis* sometimes enact public dramas of abuse that they call *escândalos* [scandals]. Scandals consist of loud, abusive cries that the *travesti*'s client (who almost inevitably self-identifies as a heterosexual male) is a *maricon*—a word that means “passive homosexual” and a word that is femininely gendered both grammatically and culturally. By refiguring her ostensibly heterosexual client as an effeminate homosexual and calling him “she,” *travestis* assert the power to define identities and the nature of social relations. They dramatically foreground the queer text that permeates client-*travesti* relations, one that the client has a great deal of vested interest in keeping hidden from public view. Scandals demonstrate how language can be utilized to interpellate individuals as transgendered, regardless of the wishes of the individual so interpellated.³¹

Another researcher who has explored the relationship between language and transgenderism is Anna Livia. In her contributions to the volumes *Gender Articulated* and *Queerly Phrased*, Livia examines the ways in which different forms of masculinity and femininity are constructed through language. What makes these analyses so interesting is Livia's focus on language intended to convey masculinity in women and femininity in men. In her delightfully titled essay “‘I Ought to Throw a Buick at You’” Livia describes the linguistic attributes of butches in lesbian novels. “Butches,” she summarizes, “speak little, . . . frequently limit their responses to monosyllabic grunts or use physical gestures instead of words to convey their meaning; are chary of expressing emotion, often letting the lyrics of songs speak for them; and their vocabulary as concerns femmes is one of possession and sexual innuendo.”³² By showing how writers draw on stereotypically “male” speech characteristics to frame their characters as butch, Livia demonstrates how what other

researchers still blithely refer to as “men’s” and “women’s” language is not anchored in or limited to appropriately sexed bodies. Rather, “men’s” and “women’s” language constitutes a resource that is available to be invoked and manipulated by anybody to convey and construct gendered positions and identities.

This same point is developed in Livia’s analysis of the way in which referential gender is encoded grammatically in the autobiography of the French MTF transsexual Georgine Noël. Although Noël “asserts that she has been female since birth,” Livia shows how the autobiography alternates between masculine and feminine gender concord with regard to Noël, who manipulates the French gender system in order to “express or underscore many of her changes of mood, attitude, and identification.” An analysis of referential gender in this and other French texts leads Livia to conclude that the transgendered individual “may be said to act as a troubleshooter for gender, revealing resources available in the gender system to which more traditional identities may have scant recourse.”³³

The idea that transgendered individuals have a more self-reflexive and hence a more aware and creative relationship to the gender system of their language is also a theme developed by Kira Hall and Veronica O’Donovan in their discussion of the ways in which Hindi-speaking *hijras* [eunuchs] employ grammatical gender to index identity, affect, solidarity, and hierarchy. Hall and O’Donovan analyze transcripts of interviews between *hijras* and themselves. They show that in these interviews *hijras* tend to use first-person feminine-marked grammatical forms except when they foreground their achievements in culturally masculine spheres such as home ownership, when they wish to invoke an image of themselves as trustworthy, or when they vent anger. They also switch to masculine forms when speaking about other *hijras* to convey attitudes of extreme respect or, in other contexts, disdainful contempt.³⁴

Liora Moriel’s recent article in *World Englishes* examines the lyrics of songs written and performed by Dana International, Israel’s new transsexual pop diva, who in 1998 won the Eurovision Song Contest—the yearly event, watched by millions of people, that catapulted Abba (and, two decades later, Céline Dion) to international stardom. Moriel argues that Dana International is “a significant linguistic innovator” whose lyrics “transcend any one language the way [she] transcends any one sex.” Making a claim that explicitly links transgenderism with transnationalism, Moriel suggests that Dana International (whose name quite says it all) inserts phrases from English and other languages into her songs as a way of breaking with the constraints of Hebrew, in which gender is obligatorily marked on most grammatical forms. English and other European languages are thus deployed by Dana as a way of maintaining gendered ambiguity or undecidability, something

that would not be possible in Hebrew. Although it is not clear exactly how Dana International's lyrics "subvert" Hebrew (Moriel claims that they provide "a lesson plan in subverting a language by internationalizing it"), the essay does demonstrate the creative ways in which certain transgendered individuals transcend grammatical gender and reconfigure language to express their subjectivities and desires. Moriel's article is also an important contribution toward an understanding of the ways in which signifiers of transnationality become appropriated in particular contexts and deployed in the articulation of transgressively gendered subject positions.³⁵

A similar point is made in Mark Johnson's monograph on *gays* in the southern Philippines. *Gays* are effeminate and usually cross-dressing males who "have a woman's heart stuck inside a man's body."³⁶ And just as Dana International deploys English to index a particular subjectivity that is not readily expressed in her native language, Johnson discusses how Filipino *gays* use English and words derived from English—particularly key terms such as *love*, *romanca*, or *gay*—to constitute themselves as subjects, in a very particular way. By code switching from the local language, Tausug, into English and by using words like *love* to talk about their affective relationships and *gay* to denote their identity, *gays* performatively appropriate the United States as an imaginative space that they use to articulate views of their lives in ways that are not available to them in local discourses.³⁷ Johnson highlights the ways in which this appropriation of the "beauty and power" of the United States both links *gays'* desire and identities to transnational processes, even as it also produces a particular kind of globalized locality, one that alters and enlarges the space for *gays'* affective, social, and economic lives. Johnson uses the language practices of individual *gays* to develop his argument that "it is no longer either valid to treat the various forms and formulations of gender and sexuality as isolated or self-perpetuating islands of desire. Rather, they unfold within discourses which cross national boundaries and borders, even as they create and reproduce divergent ethnic and cultural classifications."³⁸

Like some of the other work now beginning to emerge in the study of queer language, the most recent research on transgendered language is important because it examines transgendered language in situated interactions, using it to move toward a theorization of the contingent nature of gender, and the role of language in constituting and indexing gender.³⁹ Furthermore, work like that by Liora Moriel, Mark Johnson, and Martin Manalansan documents how the kinds of gender being indexed locally are fully intelligible only in terms of global, transnational processes and perceptions.

If there is one drawback to this literature, it is that the overwhelming bulk of it does not examine language in informal contexts. With only a very few exceptions, the data analyzed by researchers have been literary, film, or song texts; constructed dialogues; onstage speech; or language produced in more or less formal interviews with scholars.⁴⁰ While the analysis of such material continues to provide important theoretical insights, the almost total absence of empirical data about how transgendered persons actually talk to one another and to people in their communities is a serious shortcoming that we need to address in future research (the same can be said about the field of queer linguistics generally). We need to do so not only to understand more fully the complexity of transgendered subjectivity but also to advance our theorizing. In much of the literature that I have just summarized, it is possible to perceive a desire by authors to present the language of their transgendered friends and research subjects as subversive, sometimes (as I noted above) subversive of the very grammatical systems that they employ. While it is entirely possible that this point could be argued in some contexts, in order for it to be convincing, we need to know more about how transgendered individuals actually talk to people in their milieus, and we need to know how those people evaluate and respond to that talk. Using linguistic resources in novel ways is not the same as “subverting,” “reconfiguring,” or even “challenging” the linguistic system as such.

This leads me to my final point—about the future. One of the most urgent tasks facing scholars interested in transgender and language, as I have stressed, is to start collecting and analyzing data about how transgendered persons actually talk—how they use language in a wide variety of social situations to engender themselves and others. Although we lack data on virtually all transgendered groups, the lacuna is especially vast when it comes to FTM transsexuals. At least as far as transsexual women, drag queens, and transgendered males like *hijras* or *travestis* are concerned, we have a few analyses of some examples of their speech. On transsexual men, or on the kinds of real-life bulldagger women represented in the lesbian novels analyzed by Anna Livia, there is nothing. One reason for this lack of interest in the speech of transsexual men, I think, is that researchers have uncritically accepted the received wisdom that informs us that hormones permit a woman to talk like a man. But to reiterate: talking like a man is not as simple as having thick vocal cords. Detailed studies of the ways in which FTMs acquire and use language in their gendered presentations of self would not only provide valuable empirical material that might be of use to interested FTMs; it would also illuminate some of the ways in which masculinity is invoked and indexed (and is invocable and indexable) more generally.

One of the great contributions that work on language and transgender can make to sociolinguistics and anthropology is to pry loose, once and for all, the connection between language and sexed bodies. Although much of the recent work in language and gender fully recognizes that language constitutes (instead of just reflects) gender, one still often finds an irritating conflation between how some (usually white, middle-class, educated) men talk (in certain contexts) and “men’s language,” and between how some (usually white, middle-class, educated) women speak (in certain contexts) and “women’s language.” There is still little sustained focus on what Kathleen Stewart has called “the interpretative practices that transform contentious dialogic speech into fixed concepts of male and female and back again.”⁴¹ This same kind of problem reappears in work on queer language that conflates what some (again, usually white, middle-class, educated) gay men say in some contexts with a general “Gay English.”⁴²

The inherent processuality, undecidability, instability, and evanescence of all semiosis are, in a sense, made flesh in transgendered individuals. The fact that transgendered individuals themselves embody process, undecidability, instability, and evanescence makes it extremely difficult for scholars researching transgender and language to attempt to essentialize their language by rooting it in their bodies, or their socialization (à la Tannen), since those bodies are often at odds with any essence that they are supposed to represent, and since that socialization (as boys? girls? boys who were girls? girls who wanted to be boys?) is far too many-layered and delicate to be captured in the gross sociological binaries that we currently have at our analytic disposal. The relationship between transgender and language is one of mutual *différance*, of a mutual fluidity that exceeds fixed meanings, remains always plural, and continually disrupts the marking of boundaries. In this sense, to investigate transgenderism is to investigate something of the nature and workings of language itself. It is also to investigate something of the nature and workings of transnationalism. Indeed, perhaps a more thorough understanding of transgender and language might provide us with innovative models for understanding global processes. For all those reasons, the study of the relationship between transgender and language is one of the most fascinating—and necessary—projects that we can engage in today.

Notes

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essay on those occasions. Bambi Schieffelin, Michael Silverstein, and Christopher Stroud provided me with their usual sharp-eyed criticism of the linguistics; David Valentine provided several valuable references and much thoughtful conversation about transgenderism. Beth Povinelli supplied the editorial pinching that allowed me to tweak the essay into final form. This article was written in Sweden, where access to literature on transgenderism is extremely limited. While my own collection of trans literature is respectable (and has recently been supplemented through the bibliographic and copying efforts of Laurel Smith Stvan), the essay could not have been written without the generosity of Ann Kroon, who kindly allowed me access to her private library.

1. Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (London: Routledge, 1995); Rosina Lippi-Green, "Accent, Standard Language Ideology, and Discriminatory Pretext in the Courts," *Language in Society* 23 (1994): 163–98; and Michael Silverstein, "Monoglot 'Standard' in America: Standardization and Metaphors of Linguistic Hegemony," in *The Matrix of Language: Contemporary Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Donald Brenneis and Ronald K. S. Macaulay (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), 284–306.
2. This essay considers only published material. I include references to essays in difficult-to-obtain conference proceedings only when those essays make points or discuss data that I have not seen in published accounts.
3. Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (London: Women's, 1980). Of course, Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967); Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972); and Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) got there even before Raymond.
4. Raymond, *Transsexual Empire*, xviii–xix.
5. Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posstranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (London: Routledge, 1991), 280–304. See also Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (Ithaca: Firebrand, 1997), 59–62; and Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1993).
6. Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballantine, 1990). A note for nonlinguists: Lakoff's book, which is widely recognized as having inaugurated the field of language and gender, is a catalog of observations about "women's language." The observations are based not on empirical observations but on Lakoff's own introspection about how she and her acquaintances talked. Lakoff focuses on differences she sees in men's and women's language to argue that social affirmation of appropriate femininity is paid for by girls and women with the coin of unassertive speech. Females are required to learn "women's language" if they are to receive approval and confirmation of themselves as feminine. However, the language prevents females from becoming effective communicators, because they are

expected to speak as powerless underlings. In this way, "women's language" disguises, naturalizes, and consolidates men's greater power in society. Like Lakoff, Tannen is an accomplished and respected linguist. *You Just Don't Understand*, however, is a book designed for a popular market, one that falls into the genre of self-help literature. The book argues that men and women speak fundamentally different languages because they are segregated during the formative years of childhood. Rather than highlight power imbalances between women and men, as Lakoff does, Tannen urges her readers to understand the differences between men's and women's language and be more tolerant of them. While many of their insights have been important, both Lakoff's and Tannen's books have been repeatedly criticized for reducing complex interactional processes to lists of gender-based traits, for generalizing from an extremely limited set of data, for working with shallow understandings of gender, and for unwittingly prescribing (rather than simply describing) gendered speech patterns. See Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 2d ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*; Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1994): 461–90; and Senta Troemel-Ploetz, "Selling the Apolitical," *Discourse and Society* 2 (1991): 489–502.

7. Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*, 53.
8. Veronica Vera, *Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 133; Jennifer Anne Stevens, *From Masculine to Feminine and All Points in Between: A Practical Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Different Path, 1990), 76; Ewa Söderpalm, *Transsexualism i ett logopediskt perspektiv* [Transsexualism in a logopedic perspective] (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1996), 56. See also Deborah Günzburger, "Gender Adaptation in the Speech of Transsexuals: From Sex Transition to Gender Transmission?" in *Gender and Belief Systems: Proceedings of the Fourth Berkeley Women and Language Conference*, ed. Natasha Warner et al. (Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group, 1996), 277.
9. H. Merle Knight, "Gender Interference in Transsexuals' Speech," in *Locating Power: Proceedings of the Second Berkeley Women and Language Conference*, ed. Kira Hall, Mary Bucholtz, and Birch Moonwomon, 2 vols. (Berkeley: Berkeley Women and Language Group, 1992), 2:314; Lou Sullivan, *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual*, 3d ed. (Seattle: Ingersoll Gender Center, 1990), 49. Compare this to the advice given to women participating in "Drag-King For-A-Day" workshops, where the workshop instructor tells women (in "an authoritative low commanding voice") that they ought to "talk slow: take all the time in the world, talk low, and say few words" (Shannon Bell, "Finding the Male Within and Taking Him Cruising: 'Drag-King For-A-Day' at the Sprinkle Salon," in *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker [New York: St. Martin's, 1993], 92).
10. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, 194; Troemel-Ploetz, "Selling the Apolitical."

11. Günzburger, "Gender Adaptation in the Speech of Transsexuals," 269; Deborah H. Feinbloom, *Transvestites and Transsexuals* (New York: Delacorte/Lawrence, 1976), 233; Mildred L. Brown and Chloe Ann Rounsley, *True Selves: Understanding Transsexualism—For Families, Friends, Coworkers, and Helping Professionals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 135; Söderpalm, *Transsexualism i ett logopediskt perspektiv*; Anne Bolin, *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1988), 134.
12. See, e.g., Canary Conn, *Canary: The Story of a Transsexual* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1974), 167; and Wilchins, *Read My Lips*, 54, 151.
13. Claudine Griggs, *S/he: Changing Sex and Changing Clothes* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 10; Renée Richards, with John Ames, *Second Serve: The Renée Richards Story* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 219.
14. Sullivan, *Information*, 48; Holly Devor, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Raymond Thompson, *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* (London: Penguin, 1995), 118–19; Mario Martino, with Harriett, *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (New York: Crown, 1977), 170.
15. See, e.g., Deborah Günzburger, "An Acoustic Analysis and Some Perceptual Data concerning Voice Change in Male-Female Transsexuals," *European Journal of Disorders of Communication* 28 (1993): 13–21; Günzburger, "Gender Adaptation in the Speech of Transsexuals"; and Jennifer M. Oates and Georgina Dacakis, "Voice, Speech, and Language Considerations in the Management of Male to Female Transsexualism," in *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*, ed. William A. W. Walters and Michael W. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
16. Sullivan, *Information*, 48.
17. Henk Asscheman and Louis J. G. Gooren, "Hormone Treatment in Transsexuals," in *Gender Dysphoria: Interdisciplinary Approaches in Clinical Management*, ed. Walter O. Bockting and Eli Coleman (New York: Haworth, 1992), 50–51; Stevens, *From Masculine to Feminine*, 74.
18. I am grateful to Ann Kroon for pointing this out to me.
19. Bolin, *In Search of Eve*, 134–35.
20. Raymond, *Transsexual Empire*, xviii–xix.
21. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
22. Quoted in Shannon Bell, "Kate Bornstein: A Transgender, Transsexual Postmodern Tiresias," in Kroker and Kroker, *Last Sex*, 112. See also Anne Bolin, "Transcending and Transgendering: Male-to-Female Transsexuals, Dichotomy, and Diversity," in *Current Concepts in Transgender Identity*, ed. Dallas Denny (New York: Garland, 1998), 77; and Griggs, *S/he*, 9.
23. See Christine Beatty, "The 'T' Word," *TransSisters: The Journal of Transsexual Feminism* 10 (1995): 50–51; James Green and Nancy Sharp, "Transgender Dialogue,"

- FTM Newsletter*, no. 36 (1997): 1–4; and Alison Laing, “A Label by Any Other Name Might Stick,” *Transgender Tapestry*, no. 74 (1995): 48.
24. Riki Anne Wilchins, “What’s in a Name: The Politics of Gender Speak,” *Transgender Tapestry*, no. 74 (1995): 46–47; Wilchins, *Read My Lips*; David Valentine and Riki Anne Wilchins, “One Percent on the Burn Chart: Gender, Genitals, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude,” *Social Text*, nos. 52–53 (1997): 215–22.
 25. Tracie O’Keefe and Katrina Fox, *Trans-X-U-All: The Naked Difference* (London: Extraordinary People, 1997).
 26. Stephen O. Murray, “Ritual and Personal Insults in Stigmatized Subcultures: Gay, Black, Jew,” *Maledicta* 7 (1983): 189–211; Blair A. Rudes and Bernard Healy, “Is She for Real? The Concepts of Femaleness and Maleness in the Gay World,” in *Ethnolinguistics: Boas, Sapir, and Whorf Revisited*, ed. Madeleine Mathiot (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 49–61; Rusty Barrett, “Supermodels of the World, Unite! Political Economy and the Language of Performance among African-American Drag Queens,” in *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon: Authenticity, Imagination, and Appropriation in Lesbian and Gay Languages*, ed. William L. Leap (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1995), 207–26; Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women’s, 1979).
 27. Michel Foucault, ed., *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980). One might well ask in what sense Barbin can be considered “transgendered” and, indeed, what that term means in the first place. Would Foucault not be the first to insist on a historical and political contextualization of the term, and would he not vigorously object to Barbin’s being swept up in its discursive wake? Let me note, therefore, that throughout this essay I use *transgender* as an umbrella term that includes “all people who cross-dress” (Bolin, “Transcending and Transgendering,” 78). *Transgendered language* is my shorthand for “different kinds of language used in different contexts by different kinds of gender-variant people.” I am fully cognizant of all the difficulties of applying *transgender* (or any other term) to the range of gender-variant subjectivities and behaviors discussed in the research that I summarize in this essay. However, my purpose is not to interrogate the cultural and historical specificities of the term, nor is it to problematize the way in which an essay like this one in fact does particular discursive work and creates the very objects about which it speaks (i.e., “transgendered subjects”). At least one doctoral thesis is currently being written on the history, semiotics, and pragmatics of transgender, and I refer interested readers to that (David Valentine, “The Production of ‘Transgender’ as a Discourse” [Ph.D. diss. in progress, New York University]; see also Valentine, “‘We’re Not about Gender’: How an Emerging Transgender Movement Challenges Gay and Lesbian Theory to Put the ‘Gender’ Back into ‘Sexuality,’” in *Anthropology Comes Out: Lesbians, Gays, Cultures*, ed. William L. Leap and Ellen Lewin [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming]).

28. Vincent Crapanzano, "'Self'-Centering Narratives," in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 107, 126. Oddly, Crapanzano's analysis of Barbin's memoirs does not consider the uses to which grammatical gender is put throughout the text (cf. Anna Livia, "Disloyal to Masculinity: Linguistic Gender and Liminal Identity in French," in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 349–68). For a brief note on this see Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, xiii n. 1.
29. Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 214–21.
30. Cf. Kira Hall and Veronica O'Donovan, "Shifting Gender Positions among Hindi-Speaking Hijras," in *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*, ed. Victoria L. Bergvall, Janet M. Bing, and Alice F. Freed (London: Longman, 1996), 251–55; and Kira Hall, "'Go Suck Your Husband's Sugarcane!' Hijras and the Use of Sexual Insult," in Livia and Hall, *Queerly Phrased*, 450–51.
31. Don Kulick, "Causing a Commotion: Scandal as Resistance among Brazilian Travesti Prostitutes," *Anthropology Today* 12, no. 6 (1996): 3–7. I did not tape-record any travesti scandals in Salvador. However, my observations indicate that clients who are ensnared in scandals tend to respond to them by remaining silent and attempting to distance themselves, as quickly as possible, from the scene of the scandal. It is interesting to compare the lack of language by these transgendered men with Crapanzano's arguments about the loss of genre that accompanied Barbin's reclassification as a man.
32. Anna Livia, "'I Ought to Throw a Buick at You': Fictional Representations of Butch/Femme Speech," in *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, ed. Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz (New York: Routledge, 1995), 258.
33. Livia, "Disloyal to Masculinity," 352, 365.
34. Hall and O'Donovan, "Shifting Gender Positions."
35. Liora Moriel, "Diva in the Promised Land: A Blueprint for Newspeak?" *World Englishes* 17 (1998): 227, 236, 229. Cf. a similarly unargued assertion by Hall and O'Donovan that *hijra* speech "subverts" the Hindi gender system ("Shifting Gender Positions," 258). For an analysis of Dana International that discusses how her lyrics also mock and transgress Israeli nationalism see Yael Ben-zvi, "Zionist Lesbianism and Transsexual Transgression: Two Representations of Queer Israel," *Middle East Report*, spring 1998, 26–28.
36. Mark Johnson, *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 89.
37. See also Martin F. Manalansan IV, "'Performing' the Filipino Gay Experiences in America: Linguistic Strategies in Transnational Context," in Leap, *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon*, 249–66.
38. Johnson, *Beauty and Power*, 13–14.
39. See Rusty Barrett, "The 'Homo-Genius' Speech Community," in Livia and Hall,

- Queerly Phrased*, 181–201; Barrett, “Supermodels of the World, Unite!”; Jason Cromwell, “Talking About without Talking About: The Use of Protective Language among Transvestites and Transsexuals,” in Leap, *Beyond the Lavender Lexicon*, 267–96; Rudolph P. Gaudio, “Not Talking Straight in Hausa,” in Livia and Hall, *Queerly Phrased*, 416–29; and C. Todd White, “On the Pragmatics of an Androgynous Style of Speaking (from a Transsexual’s Perspective),” *World Englishes* 17 (1998): 215–23.
40. See Livia, “Disloyal to Masculinity”; Livia, “‘I Ought to Throw a Buick at You’”; Naoko Ogawa and Janet S. Smith, “The Gendering of the Gay Male Sex Class in Japan: A Case Study Based on *Rasen No Sobyō*,” in Livia and Hall, *Queerly Phrased*, 402–15; Moriel, “Diva in the Promised Land”; Cromwell, “Talking About without Talking About”; Barrett, “‘Homo-Genius’ Speech Community”; Barrett, “Supermodels of the World, Unite!”; Newton, *Mother Camp*; Gaudio, “Not Talking Straight in Hausa”; Hall, “‘Go Suck Your Husband’s Sugarcane!’”; Hall and O’Donovan, “Shifting Gender Positions”; Johnson, *Beauty and Power*; and Manalansan, “‘Performing’ the Filipino Gay Experiences in America.” Although Marty Gomez, the transsexual saleswoman discussed in White’s essay “On the Pragmatics of an Androgynous Style of Speaking (from a Transsexual’s Perspective),” does not perform on a nightclub stage, the language summarized in the essay occurred as Gomez attempted to entice passersby into her photobooth so that she could take their pictures and get them to buy them. The interactions occurred in a busy shopping mall, and Gomez spoke over a microphone, often in front of “an audience of 30 or more” (218). For examples of work that does examine language in informal contexts see Rudolph P. Gaudio, “Funny Muslims: Humor, Faith, and Gender Liminality in Hausa,” in Warner et al., *Gender and Belief Systems*, 261–67; Kulick, “Causing a Commotion”; and Kulick, *Travesti*.
 41. Kathleen C. Stewart, “Backtalking the Wilderness: ‘Appalachian’ Engenderings,” in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Faye Ginsburg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon, 1990), 44.
 42. William Leap’s work contains provisos and caveats explaining that he is aware that he is only describing a particular type of linguistic behavior used in some circumstances by a particular group of gay men (namely, white, middle-class professionals living, for the most part, in Washington, D.C.). Given this awareness, and given a decade of queer theorizing that has strongly questioned the political, epistemological, and even ontological coherence of a term like *gay*, it is hard to understand why Leap insists, anyway, on calling what he studies “Gay English” (capitalized). The powerful recent criticisms of generic, flattening labels like “men’s language” and “women’s language” (e.g., Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, “Think Practically and Look Locally”) ought to be enough to make any linguist grab for the garlic and pull out a crucifix whenever such terms are even suggested.

