Feeling extraordinary in 'ordinary' spaces: Betwixt and between gender and culture in an Australian context

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Abstract

I explore the lived experiences of transgender people in Perth, Western Australia, in this article. In particular, I focus on the barriers faced by those with a non-normative gender identity in a cultural locale that demands gendered coherence – often to the exclusion and disavowal of alternative expressions. I argue that the sustainability of a liminal gender status in Perth is problematic. For transgender people in Perth, a betwixt and between gender status is substantially imbued with danger. Despite recognition of the fluidity of gender possibilities, transgender participants described the price they paid for their gendered 'deviance'. Overall, the negative receptions to their transgender identity and behaviours made the appropriation of gendered 'normalcy' all the more seductive. Drawing on Victor Turner's theories of liminality and aggregation, and Mary Douglas's concepts of purity and danger, I explore how transgender people in Perth understood, accommodated and negotiated their perceived variance and anomaly.

> They [non-transgender people] probably think a variety of things [about transgender people]. They probably try to think the worst. They probably think we are all sex workers and they probably think that we're a bad influence on their kids and that we are on the whole a bad influence, we'll change people, we're very poisonous. I think they think we'll spread …
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> ('Sarah', Perth, Australia, 2001)

In this article I explore how transgender people in an Australian

urban context conceptualise and enact their status in cultural locales that find gendered 'difference' threatening.[1] By way of Mary Douglas's (1966 [1984], 1970) theories on cultural anomaly, and especially Victor Turner's (1969, 1982) on liminality and aggregation, I adopt an analytical vantage point to foster an interpretation of public responses to private genders (and sexualities). Contemplating the view that expressions of the gendered 'self' take place within predominantly monogendered social and cultural spaces in Australia, the transgender individual (and other individuals of variant identity) often negotiate public spaces by modifying their behaviours – bodily, verbal and spatial – to present a coherent and readable gender. Bodies and symbolic cues are used often by transgender people to reflect, as closely as possible, a semblance of culturally-mediated gendered 'normalcy'. These processes have been consolidated through occupation of what Douglas (1966) and Turner (1969, 1982) refer to as 'liminal' spaces where people can explore gendered expressions. In these spaces, gender boundaries are temporarily lifted and the distinction between gendered bodies becomes considerably ambiguous. In the public sphere, however, the transitional body occupies a more precarious position. I focus on the ways that local constructions of gender identity may be affected by public and popular representations and expectations of bodies, and conclude that liminality did not represent (and was not represented as) a space invested with gender potential. When translated into everyday reality for transgender individuals in Perth, the phase is substantially imbued with danger.

Transgendering the Theoretical in public domains

Any exploration of the cultural anxieties provoked by the anomalous body requires an investigation of what makes a body 'ambiguous' in a certain culture and why. As I discuss below, limits in all ethnographic settings exist to ensure that the 'ambiguous' body remains outside dominant gender conceptualisations, persistently constructing liminal gender identities as socially dangerous and undesirable. Referring to the mechanisms identified by Douglas (1966, 1970), and theories of aggregation as conceptualised

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by Turner (1982), I argue with regard to an Australian urban context that various devices for dealing with 'ambiguity' and anomaly come into play at differing levels to constrain, define and condemn bodies considered anomalous by sectors of the broader, non-transgender society.

Mary Douglas (1966) argued that 'Culture, in the sense of the public, standardised values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals' (p. 38), a view that needs to be understood as involving a continual dialogical relationship between private and public spheres. Ekins (1997) points out that '[i]n making sense of self, identity and the world, there is constant interplay between private experiences and public knowledge' (p.20). He elaborates by emphasising interrelations between three meaning frames or, more specifically, three bodies of knowledge in so-called 'Western' settings: scientific or expert knowledge, member knowledge and lay or commonsense knowledge (1997: 20).

Cross-cultural research in this field has also revealed that explanations for, and understandings of, gender variance and transgression are culturally and historically specific (Herdt 1994; Morris 1994; Kulick 1998). These bodies of knowledge inform and shape how members of a particular culture perceive and interpret gender variance, as well as how individuals perceive and understand their *own* gender variance. Focusing on contrasting representations, discourses and contexts of transgender issues allows one to discern where particular ideas about bodies, genders and sexualities merge and emerge, and how these ideas influence not only the ways in which transgender people are regarded and understood by others, but also how they regard and understand themselves.

Halberstam's (1998) work is also useful here. She writes that in 'Western' cultures that embody a dichotomous gender system, masculinity and femininity are seemingly broad enough categories to allow a dimorphic gender system to remain intact through the seeming flexibility of these categories (p. 20). The research of Halberstam and others (Butler 1999; Bell & Binne 2004; Gamson 2002) indicates that there is growing recognition and acceptance that women and men come in different sizes, shapes and colours with gender boundaries continually re-defined and expanded. Despite these perspectives, it is evident that persistent socio-cultural signifiers continue to define notions of femaleness and maleness in Western-derived contexts. This emphasis means that 'there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender' (Halberstam

1998, p.20), and when gender is not automatically readable a sense of discomfort or anger may result (Tomsen and Mason 2001). How gender comes to be 'read' depends on gender texts circulating in a particular cultural locale. Cohen's (1994) discussion is especially apposite here. He claims cogently that expressions of identity are 'limited in their variability both by the finite number of texts and by the concepts with which their culture equips them to engage competently in the practice of interpretation' (1994: 135). Conflating the views of these theorists, it is clear that culturally-infused gender texts inform a culture's members of how far the gender categories can stretch before slipping over into an undetermined liminal space.

On Turner's use of liminality

The above discussion encourages appraisal of the work of Victor Turner (1969, 1982) a significant theorist of religion and ritual. Turner, influenced by the work of Van Gennep (1960), described liminality as 'neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere …' (Turner 1982, p. 97). Liminal beings are 'threshold' people, those that are interstructural, 'necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these people elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space' (Turner 1969, p. 95). They destabilise and threaten order by virtue of their darkness and wildness (Turner 1969, p. 95).

Turner described the state of liminality as being marked by three phases - separation, margin and aggregation (1982 p. 94). Separation marks the physical or symbolic removal of the initiate/s from normative society. The second phase, margin, sees the initiate/s enter a place where rules and constraints are temporarily suspended. Finally, aggregation symbolises the reintegration of the individual into normative society, often in an alternative form. My primary interest here is to explore the final phase of the rites — aggregation — in part because it helps to explain the space along Australian transgender paths where an individual physically re-engages with the ideas and practices of the 'dominant' monogendered, culture.

Liminality is usually concerned with transformation, or a coming into being, and as a process that is always in motion toward a certain end (Turner 1982: 94). Theorists such as Judith Butler believe that there is no 'end', arguing that gender is 'in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end' (1999: 274). Gender, Butler argues,

congeals over time on bodies and in practice to 'produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1999: 275). Butler's argument resonates with others that have emerged in Queer Theory, where there 'is a plea for massive transgression of all conventional categorizations and analyses … a breaking of boundaries around the gender/the erotic/the interpersonal, and a plea for dissidence' (Stein & Plummer 1999: 134).

However, theorists such as Prosser challenge the queer notion of gender displacement and the fantasy of 'transgender as playful, subversive crossing' (1995: 497). Focusing on the liminal stage, Prosser suggests that rather than being a site of empowerment, for many transgender people it is often an uninhabitable and painful space: the subjective experience of existing in 'non-belonging' being quite contrary to ways in which queer translates into theory (1995: 489).

Despite the theoretical weight of arguments from Queer Theory, the sustainability of liminal identities in the city of Perth, Western Australia, appears to become difficult when the characteristics of liminality are transferred to (or become transparent in) a public setting; findings similar to those argued by Prosser (1995). Aggregation, as a contrast, is the final stage of the rite, the stage in which 'the passage is consummated' (Turner 1982: 94). It is where the individual or group is once again in a steady (although often different) position, is part of the social structure and once more subject to rights, obligations, norms and ethical standards of the given society (Turner 1982, p. 94). It is also the state that most transgender people I worked with strived to reach or believed that they should be striving to reach. On obtaining this state many people told me they believed that they had reached the end of their gendered journey and had therefore become their 'true' gendered selves. In some ways this emphasis accords with what Turner described as the expectation that accompanies aggregation, which is 'to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions' (1982: 95).

As Ekins (1997) has found, there is relief gained from existing within a defined (normative) category, a claim that resonates with my own understandings about transgender people, most of whom did not want to be perceived as an alternative gender. The majority of 'trannies' (a local term of self-identity, and one which is used elsewhere) I interviewed in Perth did not read their gender as having the potential to subvert or expand existing public gender categories. Consequently, the desire to re-incorporate themselves

into the wider community became a key determinant of identity. Most wanted to be accepted as 'normal' and felt as though they belonged *within* existing gender structures rather than *beyond*. The idea of reaching 'home', described by Prosser (1995) as being symbolically linked with 'very powerful notions of belonging' proved to be extremely seductive (485-6).

Those transgender bodies that remain anomalous, defying gendered and physical restrictions, however, are more often punished and disrespected. Many transgender people try to avoid public spaces altogether or endeavour to move through such spaces unnoticed and invisible. Communities of individuals who do not (or do not wish to) pass in monogendered spaces often converge in what have been described as 'safe spaces' (usually suburbs or neighbourhoods in urban areas) that are mainly occupied by people of alternative sexualities[2]. These spaces are often geographically bounded and insular, distinct and distant from neighbouring heterosexualised spaces, and members of these enclaves spend the majority of their time in and around these locations. Smaller 'safe spaces' that are marked off as 'queer' (usually indicated by the presence of the rainbow flag)[3] are also found within wider hetero-sexualised spaces.

Perth, Western Australia - A less than safe urban space and place

> 'I'm sick of people looking at me like I'm an extraordinary piece of machinery…'

There are few 'safe spaces' for transgender people in Perth. There is no bounded geographical suburb occupied exclusively by transgender people, and only a small collection of predominantly queer locations such as local nightclubs. Trannies in Perth spend the majority of their everyday lives moving through monogendered spaces and when the opportunity to retreat to the sanctity of 'safe spaces' is limited, they have little choice but to negotiate 'unsafe' public space. The following narratives — collected during

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[2]   Some theorists argue that these safe spaces – typically associated with gay cultures - also act to exclude certain 'unwanted' individuals, in particular those identities that have not been 'mainstreamed' and commoditised (Binnie 2004; Bell & Binne 2004).

[3]   The rainbow flag has been appropriated by the Queer Movement to symbolise the infinite number of hues sexuality and gender can take (*Sexing The Label*, 1995).

fieldwork[4] make plain this point by revealing that cross-gender behaviours often evoke strongly negative emotions among persons who encounter transgender individuals.

'Contagion'

'Belinda' told me that when she revealed to a close male friend that 'the person he thought was a he was actually a she', he reacted venomously. He told her to stay away from him and his children (having in her opinion) symbolically associated her transgenderism with notions of danger, deviance and contagion. Belinda also told me that she had recently reassured her eight years' old son that he would not 'catch' transsexualism from her. The need to reassure him was prompted by a phone call Belinda had with her parents. In relation to her gender reassignment surgery, her mother had said 'it's a despicable thing you've done'. Her father (who called her by her birth name 38 times during the conversation) told Belinda that her son was 'a very confused boy and I would not be surprised if he committed suicide by the time he was 18'.

'Wendy', another participant, confided that a male friend would no longer associate with her in case 'it was catchy'. Contagiousness emerged as a common theme in narratives. Contagiousness in Douglas's analysis has connotations of disease and illness. When something is contagious one common reaction is to avoid the source of contagion. The transgender person, therefore, becomes the source of danger and is associated with dangerous and undesirable elements. Efforts are made to avoid transgender people in case the non-transgender person becomes somehow sullied or 'dirty' through association.

'Deviance'

'Roberta', as further illustration, relayed that she felt her neighbours regarded her as an'object of peculiarity'. She put this down to the majority of people not knowing anything about transsexualism, and a tendency to view transsexuals as 'sick and disgusting'. She related an experience that brought to her attention the views of non-transgender people and what they perceived as her gender 'ambiguity'. One afternoon, Roberta had a visit from two police officers who were investigating the disappearance

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[4]   I undertook fieldwork in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, between 1999-2004 as part of doctoral research (see Wilson 2002, 2003). I have continued to maintain contact with transgender people and issues since that time.

of a young boy in her area. Roberta told me that the media had openly speculated that it was the work of a paedophile and she was familiar with the case. They asked if they could come in and ask her some questions. She realised that it was not a routine door-knocking visit when, during the questioning, one of the police officers asked her if she had 'a thing for little boys'. Roberta believed that her neighbours had dobbed her in to the police because she was transsexual and they associated transsexuals with 'paedophiles and the like'.

'Loneliness'

People with whom I worked regularly expressed personal, social and emotional loss following their decision to transition.[5] As theorists such as Douglas and Turner show, cultural anomalies tend to result in those concerned being treated negatively by those who openly support, or are complicit in, constructs of 'normalcy'.

The first time I met Wendy she proudly showed me through her house; included in the tour was a viewing of her wardrobe, replete with dozens of dresses and high heels. I remember another afternoon a few months later when I went to visit Wendy, she greeted me at the door in her nightie, her hair was dishevelled, the curtains were drawn and the house was quiet. She felt depressed, cornered and believed that her neighbours were laughing at her. She told me she could not find any purpose in life and could not get herself out the hole she had found herself in. She explained that she just wanted someone to love and lamented that no one visits her since she transitioned; 'and this suburb is like a mortuary', she cried (FN 1999). On this occasion, Wendy also told me about her wife and children's reaction to her gender change. She observed:

> Anyone would think I was a murderer or a paedo-
> phile or a rapist … If I was, I could understand
> them not wanting to know but I've done no harm
> to anyone … at least I am now what I want to be
> but they will not accept it, you have to conform
> to society and if you don't conform to everybody
> else's way, they don't want to know. In fact I'm a far

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[5] Some trannies told me that their families would accept their need to cross-dress but would not tolerate further consolidation of female/feminine gender identity. For others, they found family members demanding coherency. Wendy's daughter for example told her 'just be Wendy or Wayne, but for God's sake, don't be both' (FN, 1999).

> better person than I've ever been because I don't
> have that person inside me trying to get out, I don't
> have that fight in me any more … I'm at peace with
> me but I've lost so much else because they won't
> have anything to do with me (IN, 1999).

After her operation, the situation with Wendy's family deteriorated further. Her former wife saw it as the 'straw that broke the camel's back' and her mother exclaimed:

> "You've had your breasts done. I'm never going
> out with you now". And when she found out I had
> had my operation she snapped and her real feelings
> came out. "My God, you've castrated yourself, it's
> disgusting". It's no use me ringing her because she
> will just hang up.

Wendy stated simply, "I am the person I wanted to be now but what has it cost me to become her?"

'Policing the boundaries'

'Miranda's' wife caught her dressed in a frock. She was 'disgusted' by the sight and made her promise not to do it again.Miranda did not dress in women's clothing for a year or two, during which time she underwent a series of tattoos as a bid to consciously act and be seen as 'blokey'. But the lies were getting Miranda down so much that she approached her wife, confessing that she had been thinking about doing it again (in reality she admitted to me that she dresses whenever she achieves a private moment) to which her wife went wild. Miranda told me that her wife 'tried to make me promise not to do it again. She told me it revolted her and it was a turn off. She compared it to me coming home and finding her having sex with the dog. "That's how disgusting I find it", she said'.

Noticeable in the Perth-based accounts I recorded is that the reactions of family, friends and associates appeared to mirror closely those evident in the wider society. Belinda's experience makes plain the response that acts to disavow her discordant gender identity. She had endured a trying relationship with her parents since transitioning. She regularly attempted to reach out but found them unwillingly to listen or endeavour to understand her situation. On one occasion, she rang me, very upset. It was her

birthday and she had received a card in the mail from her parents. It had a vintage car on the cover and it said 'Happy Birthday Son'. They had heavily underlined the word 'Son', enclosed a $20 note, and a birthday message using Belinda's former male name. She was devastated.

Members with coherent gender expressions police the social and conceptual boundaries of (limited) gender possibilities making sure that those pushing or challenging them are pulled into line by the reactions of others – depending upon whether they succumb to the pressure to conform, the *outsiders* are either accepted back into gendered 'normalcy' or expelled. Wendy's experience is valuable here, in part because, in her words, being transgender was the most discriminated status in Perth:

> They'll accept a disability. They don't look at that, it's something you are born with; you are blameless. Whereas with us they reckon you can change this. If you just went in and had a big hit of testosterone you'd be alright and that's what I get from people. And if it was that simple and easy, that's what would happen for everyone who was transsexual. Others won't understand it. I don't understand someone who is a paedophile, I have no idea, they have something inside them that makes them want to do that but I have no idea why they do it. To me it's one of the last things I'd think of doing. I think the best thing you can do is to do your transitioning and disappear. There is always going to be someone, no matter how careful you are who will make it hard for you.

'Pandora's Box'

'Tamara', in parallel with Wendy, provides evidence regarding how such a discriminatory process occurs, one in keeping with the emphases fostered by Douglas and Turner:

> Gay, strange, weird, that's what they think of transgender people. It's like a Pandora's box, what people are going to think about it. I think it's strange that gays are tolerated a lot more than transgender or transvestites even though society is 100% heterosexual. Why? Part of it I suppose is more exposure to gay lifestyles and stuff and part of it is that gays dress very much like any other person but when a guy puts on a dress, that's just something some

people just seem not to be able to accept. And
partly, yeah, a little bit of fear.

Belinda also associated wider concerns about the transgender
body with inaccurate stereotyping, commenting that non-trans-
gender people think that transgender people are:

> …drag queens and they think of all those stereo-
> types on TV. Stereotypical, sick, in your face. Some
> of the things I've seen on movies and TV, things
> like transgender people chatting to some guy next
> to them and then you realise they are in the toilets,
> standing up at the urinal. It gives a really bad
> misconception, not real. They don't realise that we
> can just blend into society. They don't think that is
> what we want to do.

She further elaborated on what she viewed as society's tendency
to deal with 'difference' by lumping it all in the same basket. In
this way, 'difference' is marked and removed from the formal,
normative social structure and relegated to the margins, marginal
beings associated with the 'bizarre and untrimmed' (Douglas
1970: 85):

> I think they clump everyone who doesn't fit into
> the 100 percent normal category into the gay
> community. They call it the gay community but they
> mean anything that's slightly alternative goes into
> that community. Even people who eat left-handed
> go into that group, that's what they do, that's our
> culture. There's right and wrong and it's white is
> right and that attitude is still really prevalent

That participants' discussed the ways in which societal expec-
tations and rules of gender limited the potential for exploring
gender in terms other than male or female was regularly highlig-
hted. As Wendy put it:

> You're either male or female and nobody accepts
> nothing else. They will not accept that people are
> different whether they be transsexuals, cross-dres-
> sers, whether they are lesbians, homosexuals, people
> have got this thing that you are supposed to be one
> thing or the other. Thing is, things have been like
> that, things have been mixtures for thousands of
> years, even in Pharaoh times, the things they wore,
> a lot of them were cross-dressers or transsexuals.

> But people cannot accept it in Western societies, anybody that is not the norm as they call it but then what is the norm? People who call themselves normal, they've got more hang ups than anyone else. At least I know what I am. A lot of them don't know what they are and they call themselves normal and us not normal.

Sarah was the only individual I worked with who expressed the desire to possess both male and female genitals telling me:

> I am an androgyne and wanted to have a neo-vagina and retain male bit. I was refused. If there was a way that I could have a vagina without losing my male bit, I'd do it. But the doctor said no but wouldn't explain on what grounds but you can guess – they just think people should be male or female. The doctor just said 'no way'.

Sarah's desire to play with, mix and create genders was promptly circumvented. She believed that the operation was surgically possible, however, she noted the commitment of most practitioners to maintaining the binary gender system. Sarah's story was an unusual situation in Perth but may have parallels elsewhere.

Wanting to be 'normal'

Robert, a female to male transsexual in his late 30s had this to say about the 'normalised' gender system:

> Just male and female, that's all they are able to see but technically when you think about it there's about 10 to 11 different types of gender. You've got homosexuals who go with male partners. You've got bisexuals who are comfortable with both, you've got heterosexuals, you've got hermaphrodites, people born with two sets of organs, female and male. You have people like [named] who has XXY [chromosomes]. There's transsexuals, there's transvestites, drag queens, there's this, there's that and people don't get the full scope of the picture. They just see black and white, male, female. Whatever in between is freak or suffering some bad disease which is why people don't want to get too close in case it's contagious.

So powerful is the pull of normalcy, that despite his recognition of the fluidity of gender, Robert explained, 'I just want to stand up like any other normal man and take a leak … just waltz in and unzip the fly, stand there and do what I have to do, give it a bit of a shake, put it away, do it up and out. No big deal'.

The origins of these beliefs and understandings can be found in accounts given by individuals of their experiences of negotiating life as transgender in a largely monogendered context. Most of the participants I interviewed had experienced negative reactions to their transgender presence in non-transgender spaces. Reactions to gender variance when it is recognised in public spaces will vary in degree. Often it takes the form of a second glance, a snigger or abuse hurled from the car window. 'Lucinda' describes this process below, via an incident that occurred when she drove home late one night from a local hotel:

> I get abused occasionally. Last night, I was driving home and some . . . it was teeming with rain and I pulled up at the traffic lights and these boys yelled out, I had the window slightly open because it was a bit stuffy in the car, and they just hurled abuse at me. I'm not quite sure what it was all about. I mean their primary words of abuse were 'fuck', pretty limited abuse and they weren't content to just wind their windows down and shout it, they had to lean right out and shout it. It was teeming with rain and we followed the same route [down a Highway] and every time we came anywhere close to them, they were, all three of them, the driver wasn't but the other three, they were only kids, just were being abusive. I just thought 'drive on'. I usually ignore. I just didn't do anything to them and that upset them. That really got them going.

Such a description illustrates the anticipatory nature of transgender abuse. Lucinda described this incident in response to the question 'Have you ever experienced any sort of discrimination you felt was due to your transgender status?' However, this could have been a random event not directly linked to Lucinda's appearance - a non-transgender person could easily have been the victim. That she saw it as a response to her transgenderism indicates that transgender people are highly alert to the threat of violence, distrust and abuse.

Belinda related another story to me about an incident that occurred in a doctor's waiting room. Waiting for her appointment to be called and reading a magazine, she happened to look up and saw a woman was staring at her. She went back to reading but could feel the woman's eyes on her. Belinda started to panic, thinking that she had been 'read'[6]. She almost got up and ran away but instead she gathered the courage together to ask the woman, 'is everything okay?' To which the woman replied that she had been admiring Belinda's dress and wondered where she had bought it. Belinda told me she started laughing with relief as she told the woman that she had bought it in Thailand and they were not available in Perth.

In some instances, there is no doubt behind the motivation of an assault, a view that attests that the perceived threat of violence against transgender people is undoubtedly real. For example, one individual had been violently sexually assaulted in the mid-90s and the perpetrator told the police, 'I wanted to know what it was like to fuck a freak'.

A short story of kindness

Despite what so many stories reveal about the daily difficulties transgender persons face, some informants told me of situations and relationships where they had been treated with respect and kindness. 'Melanie' provides a wonderful illustration of this point. She had transitioned two years before I met her and readily told me about the reactions she had received from friends and family to her gender change:

> All my friends have been, they have been really good. I've been so gratified by it. Such a good experience. I have heard some pretty horrible stories about transsexuals. I know one Italian transsexual [named] and she's been totally ostracised by her family, they will not have anything to do with her ever again. So I can imagine that'd be pretty tough. My friends are really good, without exception everyone has been really cool about it. A lot of the guys, most of my friends are women anyway, a lot of the guys they're all cool about it they can deal

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6   Being 'read' or 'spotted' indicates to a transgender person that they have not successfully 'passed' as their preferred gender; the 'reader' has identified that the transgender person's appearance is at odds with their biological sex.

> with it and everything, sometimes though they are
> a bit taken aback, not really sure what to say or how
> to act. But they all know me that I'm fairly normal
> and pretty easygoing sort of type, so they generally
> come around, it's no problem.

The all-encompassing acceptance Melanie received from her
family and friends is exceptional among those I interviewed.
Melanie and others like her are considered extremely fortunate
by other transgender people as most had experiences more like
"Rebecca", a male to female transsexual. Rebecca wrote an email
to me about the reactions to her decision to transition: 'I have had
two close female friends and one not-so-close say to me when I
came out, "You go girl", "I'm not surprised", and "Finally!" but
they were in the minority. 3/1000ish'.

Analytical implications

A noticeable fatalism towards what was seen as inevitable hostility
and rejection appeared to motivate individuals to avoid particular
spaces and people, to strive for normalcy and to choose certain
symbols of gender to wear or surround oneself with. This point
has been reiterated elsewhere. In a recent Australian and New
Zealand survey, for example, transgender participants expressed
the same anticipatory fear of retaliation, with almost two-thirds
of the 253 surveyed reporting that they modified their behaviour
in public spaces (Couch et al. 2007; see also Doan 2007). Most
trannies in Perth learned from other trannies where they could
go and be able to move in peace without the threat of violence,
and most made an effort not to 'flaunt' themselves in people's
faces – 'I don't rub people's noses in it, I just do minimal, nothing
outrageous' - and attempt to appear and present as fairly 'normal'.
They know places and situations to avoid in order to minimise
the possibility of negative reactions. As Tamara explained:

> I suppose it's the acceptance thing or I suppose
> you've got to get past people looking at you. I'm
> six foot tall and I've got a reasonable physique,
> so I stand out in a crowd for a start. I guess it's
> insecurity and goes back to the public alarm stuff,
> I'm worried about what the public thinks, what
> reactions I'll get.

While some cultures provide the capacity for social, bodily and
linguistic expression of variant gendered identities, others do
not. Members of a culture will police the boundaries of excepted
expression by disallowing and reinterpreting anomalous identities

to a less threatening identity (Connell 2010, p. 42). As Bordo has argued, members of a culture perform what they feel is culturally and socially expected from them (1989 p. 17). In doing so, movement, values and behaviours of bodies reflect precious beliefs held by a society and bestowed upon its members. Those bodies that remain anomalous are defined by what they are not. For transgender people in so-called 'Western' or southern settings such as Australia, this has often been translated into 'abnormality', pathology, danger and contagion. Danger lies, in particular, in transitional states, where the body is at its most indefinable and, for transgender people, at its most vulnerable to the possibility of outside attack. Consequently, participants expressed that when their transgender identities were visible in public spaces, abuse and rejection were seen to be the inevitable outcomes - whether or not abuse actually occurred, and if it did, whether or not the incident was indisputably motivated by the perpetrator's recognition of the individual's transgender status[7]. Many of the experiences relayed by participants above tend to confirm Cromwell (1998), Blackwood's (1986), and Tomsen and Mason's (2001) assertions that displays of gender non-conformity are strongly linked to physical violence, verbal abuse and social ostracism. Those who 'do not affirm the primary categories of gender are feared, and consequently, they are ignored, disavowed, discounted, discredited and frequently accused of not being "real", that is, not a 'true' person (Cromwell 1998, p. 121).

Drawing, like Turner, on Van Gennep's *rites of passage* (1960) Douglas outlines how transitional ritual is marked by the symbolic death of the initiate's old way of life and the rebirth of the new. While waiting for the new life, the initiate becomes a social outcast, temporarily rejected and feared. During this phase, transgender individuals in Perth are aware of the anxieties their undefined gender creates. Transitioning involves a series of processes aimed at minimising and eliminating conflicting gender messages and for many people, gender reassignment marks the only completion of the passage and the only chance of finding acceptance. As Bolin, also informed by Turner's theories, argued, the resolution for the male to female transsexual 'is the rite of incorporation in which a "neovagina" is constructed and they conform to the

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[7]   Moran and Sharpe (2004) point out the need to be cautious against homogenising transgender experiences of violence, instead arguing that social exclusion and violence needs to be understood as an intersection between 'many different distinctions, of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so forth, and different contexts' (p. 400).

cultural minimal requirement for claim to the female gender. *Their transformation is one of order out of disorder and normalcy out of stigma'* (1988 p. 71, emphasis mine). As Wendy encapsulates:

> Before the operation you are going through a transitioning period, you're transsexual, you're trans, you're in movement but once you've had the op you're a female, you can't be going through that because there is no going back … so after the op they're not trans, they're not passing anything because that's what it means, like the transatlantic railway, it's passing, you're not doing that, you've gone through that stage and onto the other … you've left that place.

The liminal space was seen to be a genderless phase, a point I pursue elsewhere (Wilson 2002).[8] Liminality was a space to pass through, and aggregation marked the return, occupying a different status, to normative society. On a cultural level, the individual is now expected 'to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions' (Turner 1982, p. 95). The concealment of 'difference' within a body that reflects a coherent gender may result in a sense of belonging and re-acceptance into public spaces. When the body is recognised as an unambiguous gender, it is removed from associations with contagion and deviance. The transgender individual can now assimilate *within* the margins and moves with anonymity. The desire to conceal difference in public spaces seems to override, for many, the option of playing with gender, especially when the categories of man and woman remain so culturally meaningful.

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[8] Interestingly, a number of post-operative male to female trannies told me that they would rather people be unsure of their gender than to mistake them for or refer to them as a male. In this instance, liminality is seen as the preferred option.

Conclusions

The ethnographic description and cultural analysis I have presented here, most specifically by way of participant stories, shows clearly that most trannies I worked with in an Australian capital city experienced negative reactions to their desire to alter their gender. Often this came from family members and close friends, and resulted in ostracism from their partners and children, and the breakdown of relationships with friends. Many linked these reactions to wider societal discourses concerning contagion, disease and deviance, and recognised that it was the visible anomalous status of their bodies that appeared to inspire fear in the non-transgender population. Gender was described as being fluid and multiple in theory but limited to two genders only in reality. Participants expressed a fatalistic attitude about having to 'fit' within the existing dualistic gender system.

People who existed outside the margins could inevitably expect negative repercussions. The liminal phase was considered by most to be a temporary one, not a liveable gender option. The status is not supported socially in Western Australia, an emphasis reflected in the stories I have presented; stories focused on 'completing the journey' in the pursuit of a 'normalcy' that could only be reached through successful aggregation.

Transgender individuals in Perth had numerous motivations for desiring to reach the point of aggregation but motivations were guided by the recognition that their society demanded the completion and expression of an articulate and stable gender identity, and lacked alternative discourses. The choice was made between the benefits and privileges associated with performing the gender adequately and assimilating quietly into the existing gender system, and to the often hostile and violent reactions to the visible 'difference' of the liminal body. The desire among transgender people to reincorporate themselves into the wider community became the key determining motivation in transitional discourses. Aggregation becomes the main intention, 'the passage is consummated and the ritual subject … re-enters the social structure' (Turner 1974, p. 232).

As Robert so tellingly stated:

> I know I'm getting closer to my final goal which is the completion of my surgery. And from there, things are going to be fine; I'll just blend in and go my own little way.

I felicitously found this image of a transgender 'Redheads girl' on a box of Redheads matches in 2001. Redheads have been making matches in Australia since 1909, and the Redheads logo – a glamorous, heavily made up redheaded female - is a very well known image. In 2001, Redheads held a national competition to design an alternative representation of the classic Redheads image; for a limited time selected images were reproduced onto matchboxes. As I was lighting my stove one evening I did a double take when I realised, with much amusement, that the Redheads girl was sporting a three-day growth. What particularly resonated was the subtle way that transgender had managed to slip its way into households across Australia.

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