

See Chapter 10 in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* for corresponding teaching materials.

SECTION 7

TRANSGENDER OPPRESSION

Introduction

*Chase Catalano and Davey Shlasko*¹

Since the late 1990s, transgender issues have gradually come into increasing public awareness in academia, law, and popular culture. The past few years have seen a handful of new academic publications that are able to go beyond explorations of transgender identity or queer/gender theory, and focus on specific venues where transgender oppression plays out.² These new resources mean that students and scholars (and sometimes activists) have data and analysis to draw on and build from, no longer limited to narratives, memoirs, and anthologies of personal stories to piece together how systems of oppression manifest in trans lives and experiences.

At the same time, a number of legislative and policy victories have the potential for positive impact on many trans people's lives. For example, in 2011 the states of Nevada, Connecticut, and Massachusetts all passed laws banning discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression, bringing the total number of states with such protections up to sixteen (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force [NGLTF], 2012). We can feel hopeful when we consider that in sixteen states, the District of Columbia, and some smaller jurisdictions, it is illegal to discriminate against trans people in housing, employment, and in some cases public accommodations. However, in total, this means that only 44 percent of the U.S. population lives in areas covered by these laws (NGLTF, 2011). The media coverage of such changes, along with flurries of stories about celebrity or celebrated trans people such as Chaz Bono, Thomas Beatty (a trans man who gave birth to a baby in 2008), and Jenna Talackova (a trans woman who was disqualified from the Miss Universe competition based on her trans status), may make it appear that trans issues are now "mainstream." Yet trans communities still face tremendous obstacles, and contemporary examples of oppression against trans individuals and communities are widespread.

Violence and discrimination against transgender people are still of pandemic proportions. Although gender identity and expression are now included in federal hate crimes legislation,³ federal law enforcement does not yet track or report crimes based on gender identity and expression, as they do with hate crimes based on federally protected classes, such as race, religion, and sex (FBI, 2009, 2011). For this reason it is very difficult to state with any certainty the number of bias-motivated crimes against transgender and gender non-conforming people. However, members of the trans community try to keep track of publicized incidents, and memorialize each year at the Transgender Day of Remembrance on November 20 transgender and gender non-conforming people who have been murdered. According to these community groups' estimates, at least 221

people were murdered in anti-transgender hate crimes worldwide between November 2010 and November 2011, including at least nine in the U.S. Compared to the previous years' counts of 179 and 162, this seems to show a rising trend in reported murders of trans people (Transgender Europe, 2011). These counts of confirmed cases are definitely a drastic undercount, since they only include people whose transgender identities were known and since police departments in most jurisdictions have no obligation and indeed no way to report these murders as hate crimes.

Because non-discrimination laws do not protect most transgender people in the United States, we may be denied housing, employment, and public benefits with little if any legal recourse. The first national survey of trans people's experiences with discrimination resulted in a release in 2011, by the National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which showed that 63 percent of transgender survey respondents had experienced "a serious act of discrimination," such as being fired, evicted, or assaulted due to their gender identity or expression (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling, 2011). Respondents were nearly twice as likely as the general population to have attained a four-year college degree, yet nearly four times as likely to be earning less than \$10,000 a year, indicating severe and pervasive employment discrimination. Nearly one fifth of respondents had been homeless at some point, and the same proportion report having been denied health care based on their gender identity or expression (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling, 2011). For many trans people, the ability to update their name and gender on identification documents such as a drivers license or passport can offer some protection from discrimination and harassment; unfortunately there are many barriers to making these updates, and this report found only 21 percent of respondents who have transitioned gender have been able to update all relevant ID and records. People of Color and lower-income people were even less likely to have updated their documents (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling, 2011). Trans people also are arrested and imprisoned disproportionately to the general population, due both to economic marginalization and to stereotyping by police officers, and once in prison they are extremely vulnerable to sexual assault, medical neglect, and other abuses (Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2007). All these challenges take their toll: the report indicates that over 40 percent of trans people have attempted suicide (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, and Keisling, 2011).

The reality represented by these discouraging statistics leads us to identify the oppression of transgender people as a problem worthy of study and action within a multi-issue social justice liberation movement.

DEFINITIONS

Transgender oppression (sometimes referred to as cissexism, genderism, or binarism) is closely related to sexism and to heterosexism, and there are also important differences (see Griffin, 2007, on the section website). In order to distinguish them, we need to define some terminology. Many people understand gender to be synonymous with sex, referring to the categories of male and female. In fact, *sex* and *gender* are not the same thing, and both are more complicated than a male/female binary. In this section (as in the preceding two sections on sexism and heterosexism), we use *sex* to describe biological factors, such as chromosomes, genitals, and hormone levels that are used to categorize people as male or female at birth and throughout their lives. In reality, more possibilities exist; many people have some aspect of their biology that would challenge simple categorization of their body as male or female (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 2002). Individuals whose physical bodies are not easily categorized as male or female are called *intersex*.⁴

Gender refers to a wide range of social/cultural meanings that are ascribed to sex categories. We like to think of gender as composed of both *gender identity* and *gender expression*. *Gender identity* refers to a person's internal self-concept with regard to gender categories like man, woman, transgender, genderqueer, and many others. *Gender expression* refers to behaviors,

such as attire, demeanor, and language, through which we intentionally or unintentionally communicate gender. As Hackman describes (in the introduction to the section on sexism), *gender roles* are specific sets of expectations for gender expression, which characterize what men and women are "supposed to" be in a particular society. The dominant assumption is that an individual's sex, gender identity, and gender expression always line up—for example, that all female-bodied people identify as women and express themselves through femininity—and further that there are two and only two sexes, and two and only two genders (where identity and expression are conflated). This faulty assumption, often referred to as the *sex/gender binary*, is the foundation of our analysis of transgender oppression.

It is also common to confuse gender identity and expression with *sexual orientation* (i.e., the gender/s one is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to), and, thus, to confuse transgender oppression with heterosexism. In fact, one's gender identity and expression is not necessarily related to one's sexual orientation. Transgender people, like all people, have a variety of sexual orientations including heterosexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, and queer.⁵ For further discussion of gender, sexuality, and terminology, we refer readers to the sections on heterosexism and sexism, as well as to Pat Griffin's discussion included on this section's website.

Based on these definitions, we use the term *transgender* broadly to describe people whose gender identity and/or gender expression do not match societal expectations (Catalano, McCarthy, and Shlasko, 2007) and for whom this fact is central to their identity and/or important in determining their life circumstances. Transgender is also a term of self-identity that is claimed by some, but not all, people who fit in our broad definition. People who fall under the transgender umbrella may or may not identify as transgender, and may also identify with other terms such as male-to-female (MtF), butch, female-to-male (FtM), genderqueer, femme, androgynous, two-spirit, and others.

The ability to name and define one's own identity and experiences is a vital element of empowerment for marginalized peoples. Terms of self-identity are important tools that help people to survive with, in, and/or in resistance to the gender binary. At the same time, we use transgender as a broad descriptor so that we can discuss social phenomena that affect people in this category, across many variations in how people understand and describe themselves. Responsible study of transgender issues requires constant reflection about the language we use. In particular we urge readers to consider whether any term you might come across is being used by trans people to identify themselves, or by professionals in public health, social services, law or academia to describe a group of people whose relationship to that term may be fraught (see e.g. Valentine, 2007).

We define *transgender oppression* as the system of oppression that targets and marginalizes people who are transgender in the broadest sense. The system privileges non-transgender people, also called *cisgender*⁶ people, whose gender identity and expression conform with relative ease to societal expectations. Like other forms of oppression, transgender oppression is harmful and limiting to everyone, including those who occupy a privileged position. It has particular impact on those who transition from living entirely or primarily in one of the two socially sanctioned genders (man or woman) to living entirely or primarily in the other, or who live between or outside these categories. Often, this is the group that people are referring to when they say transgender. Although we use transgender more broadly, many of the phenomena we focus on as examples of transgender oppression are particularly evident for this group.

Because many people view gender as a presumed-natural binary, those of us whose experience does not match this assumption are often viewed as unnatural. The medical system reinforces this view, especially with regard to those of us who choose to change our bodies, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V*, which classifies the desire to change the sex of one's body (through hormones, surgeries, or other options) as evidence of a mental illness called gender identity disorder. This diagnosis forms the basis of the current "*medical model*" of transgender identity, which positions transgender identity as an illness with biomedical transition as the cure, thereby establishing medical authority to "diagnose" gender identity and to supervise gender transition.⁷

One central assumption of the medical model is that all trans people experience extreme distress about being trans. This can lead well-meaning allies to feel pity or sympathy for transgender people. Some trans people do experience internal struggles about their gender, and many trans people also find joy and pride in our gender identity and expression. The medical model ignores positive aspects of trans experience.

It is difficult to overestimate the historical and current impact of the medical model on transgender lives, communities, and movements because much of how we understand transgender has been shaped by the medical model. Transgender people inevitably end up having to navigate the medical system's assumptions about us, whether because we choose to participate in the system in order to seek medical transition or because medical providers pass judgment on our non-conformity and create barriers to accessing even basic primary health care. Dean Spade's piece in this section (selection 88) addresses some of the complexities of trans communities' relationships to the medical model.

Like all forms of oppression, transgender oppression can be internalized. At the most basic level, *internalized transgender oppression* is internalization of the sex/gender binary. The binary asserts that only two categories of people exist: masculine, man-identified males, and feminine, woman-identified females. For some trans people, the internalization of this belief system may lead us to doubt whether we can be a "real" man or "real" woman, or even whether we are "real" at all. For others, the internalization of the gender binary may lead us to enact hyper-femininity or hyper-masculinity in attempts to "prove" our identity.

Another aspect of internalized transgender oppression is internalization of the medical model. Many trans people disagree with some aspects of the medical model and prefer to see trans identity not as pathology but rather as a natural expression of human variation. Yet the influence of the medical model is so pervasive that we may accidentally accept some of its assumptions even if we do not believe in them (such as the assumption that all trans people experience a certain kind of discomfort in their bodies).

When we are able to come together as a community, we can mitigate some of the brutal effects of internalized oppression and create space for trans people to have more agency in defining and making choices about our lives. The recent emergence of numerous trans memoirs, biographies, and documentaries, as well as trans advocacy organizations around the world are further examples of resistance by trans people who refuse to buy into the messages of shame and isolation. We hope more will be published about the complexities of internalized transgender oppression and the ways in which individuals and communities are working toward liberation.

SEXISM, HETEROSEXISM, AND TRANSGENDER OPPRESSION

There are various ways to understand the relationships among sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression. The way we think of it is that these three systems, along with the oppression of intersex people, are conceptually distinct but overlapping systems. They have in common an overarching system of norms and expectations related to bodies, gender, sexuality, and family relationships that dictate which identities are considered normal, which are deviant, and in some cases which identities are acknowledged to exist at all.

In addition, there are many specific manifestations of oppression that play out similarly. For example, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) and transgender people may be labeled as mentally ill when we are not and may be discouraged from interacting with children because of irrational fears that we will influence the children to become LGB or T. Both women and trans people are often targeted for sexual assault and are encouraged to entrust our bodies to doctors while dissociating from our own knowledge of what our bodies need and want. In addition, sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression often occur in tandem. When a gay man with a feminine gender expression is targeted for violence based on his femininity, gender non-conformity,

and presumed sexual orientation, all three systems are at play. With the constant evolution of terminology and philosophy around transgender issues, we look forward to seeing the new ways we will conceive and describe these relationships.

The history of trans communities and movements has often been intertwined with LGB activism and with feminism. Many LGB organizations now include transgender issues in their mission and extend the acronym to LGBT. The inclusion of transgender within LGB movements and organizations acknowledges the historical connections of the communities and has created space for the concerns of trans people to be addressed as part of broader LGBT liberation efforts. However, it is not always a natural fit, and often these organizations struggle with how to enact their intention of being trans-inclusive. The lumping in of T with LGB has also reinforced confusion about the meaning of transgender, which many people misunderstand as being a sexual orientation.

In some ways, transgender liberation movements should be a natural fit with feminist movements, since they share a fundamental goal of eliminating oppression based on gender. However, ideological conflicts between trans and non-trans feminists have surfaced on many fronts.⁸ In order to work together to overcome the overlapping systems that target all women (whether or not they are trans) and all trans people (whether or not they are women), trans and feminist movements need to seek a mutually beneficial definition of feminism that would “dismantle the structures that prop up gender as a system of oppression, but [. . .] without passing moral judgment on people who feel the need to change their birth-assigned gender” (Stryker, 2008, p. 3).

Even with the tension around trans issues in feminist and LGBT movements, trans people have always been part of LGBT and feminist organizing. Trans people’s participation in these and other social movements has been omitted from many accounts, sometimes out of carelessness and sometimes out of intentional reframing of the historical facts (Namaste, 2000; Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins, 2002; Stryker, 2008), leading to widespread ignorance about trans people’s history and, indeed, our very existence.

By setting aside space for discussion about transgender oppression, we acknowledge and honor the experiences of those who transgress the gender binary. We hope readers will use this section to add complexity to, rather than supersede or distract from, conversations about other forms of oppression with which it intersects. This section represents only a fragment of the innovative thinking on transgender issues that has been published, which is in turn only a tiny fragment of the brilliant wisdom and scholarship that resides unpublished in transgender communities. We hope that this section will encourage readers to seek out more information and to find your own voices about this issue.

INTRODUCTION TO THE READINGS

The pieces in this section provide a basic framework for understanding the context, acknowledging some voices, and exploring next steps about transgender experience and transgender oppression. Our focus is on contemporary transgender communities in the United States. In selecting pieces, we considered what resources would be most relevant and appealing to people who are thinking about transgender issues for the first time.

We also wanted to emphasize the interconnections among transgender oppression and other forms of oppression, especially racism and classism. One of the criticisms we often hear when attempting to include transgender issues in college curricula or student life programming is that the transgender movement is a white, upper-class movement and, thus, transgender oppression is a white, upper-class problem. Indeed it is true that much—though certainly not all—of transgender theorizing that has been published is from a perspective of race and class privilege. That should not be surprising, since most published academic theory on many topics tends to come from that perspective. In fact, gender transgression exists in all cultures, and transgender communities in the United States are as diverse racially as the nation as a whole. As far as

socioeconomic class, the economic survey data cited above suggests that transgender people are disproportionately likely to become working class and poor, even if they were raised with class privilege. We have attempted to include readings that speak to the diversity of trans experiences, and to the complex interplay among systems of oppression as they impact trans lives.

Joanne Meyerowitz's excerpt from her book *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (selection 86) outlines the historical evolution of transgender identities and definitions in the United States, using the iconic 1950s case of Christine Jorgensen to show how science has affected this evolution. Susan Stryker's piece (selection 87) outlines the Compton Cafeteria Riots of the 1960s, an early example of transgender social justice activism in U.S. history. Dean Spade (selection 88) describes some of the complexities of and problems with the medical model, including how class and gender non-conformity can limit access to medical care. Julia Serano (selection 89) discusses the rejection of trans women's issues from the feminist movement and explores some links between misogyny and transgender oppression. Finally, Ware (selection 90) describes how trans youth, and specifically trans youth of color, are impacted within the prison industrial complex.

For our Voices part, in "Passing Realities," Allie Lie (selection 91) gives a compelling account of her daily experience, including her desire to be recognized and her complex relationships with family and strangers. Jamison Green's "Look! No, Don't!" (selection 92) discusses his experience of passing and invisibility after medical transition.

In Next Steps, Taylor's "Cisgender Privilege" (selection 93) parallels Peggy McIntosh's classic article on white privilege to outline examples of how cisgender people benefit from their relatively privileged position in the system of transgender oppression. "Calling All Restroom Revolutionaries" (selection 94) reports on an organization of college students who advocate for inclusive restrooms, which benefit not only trans students but also people with disabilities and parents of young children.

FURTHER RESOURCES

This section provides an introduction to transgender history, voices, and issues and the system of transgender oppression. There is far more that could and should be explored about the range of gender transgression in the United States and globally, both historically and currently, and the variety of ways in which trans-ness has been understood by gender transgressors and those who have observed and studied their transgression. Even though this section is U.S.-focused, there are conversations going on around the world about transgender issues in culture, law, and policy. We encourage readers who would like a more international perspective, as well as many further U.S.-related resources, to go to the section website.

See Companion Website for Additional Resources and Material

Notes

- 1 We ask that those who cite this work always acknowledge by name both the authors listed rather than either only citing the first author or using "et al." to indicate coauthors. Both collaborated equally in the conceptualization, development, and writing of this chapter.
- 2 See the following examples: Beemyn and Rankin's (2011) *The Lives of Transgender People*; Spade's (2011) *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*; Stanley and Smith's edited volume (2011) *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*; and Valentine's (2007) *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. These stand out, among others.
- 3 Many advocates for trans rights do not support hate crimes legislation because they argue it does not actually reduce violence and only punishes poor people of color who are already most vulnerable to criminal prosecution and imprisonment (see Spade, 2011).

- 4 For more information on intersex issues, we refer readers to the Accord Alliance (www.accordalliance.org/), and to Sumi Colligan's piece in the ableism section of this anthology (selection 100).
- 5 Some transgender people also identify as bisexual, but many trans people reject this category because the word itself reinforces the gender binary, and instead use pansexual or queer.
- 6 Cisgender means non-trans, from the etymology *cis* meaning "on the same side," as *trans* means "across" or "crossing."
- 7 Revisions from the previous edition of the DSM (DSM IV-TR) incorporated some changes for which trans activists had been advocating for many years. At the same time, trans groups still find many shortcomings in the DSM's approach (e.g. De Cuypere, Knudson and Bockting, 2011).
- 8 For more discussion on transgender inclusion in feminist movements, see Califia (2003); Prosser (1998); Raymond (1979); Stone (1991); Stryker (2008)

References

- Beemyn, G., Rankin, S. (2011). *The Lives of Transgender People*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Califia, P. (2003). *Sex Changes: Transgender Politics* (2nd edition). San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.
- Catalano, C., McCarthy, L., Shlasko, D. (2007). Transgender oppression curriculum design. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, P. Griffin (eds), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (2nd edition). New York: Routledge.
- De Cuypere, G., Knudson, G., Bockting, W. (2011). Second response of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health to the proposed revision of the diagnosis of gender dysphoria for DSM 5, *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 13 (2), 51–53
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (2009). *Matthew Shepard/James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009*. Retrieved from http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/hate_crimes/shepard-byrd-act-brochure
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (2011, November). *Hate Crime Statistics, 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2010/resources/hate-crime-2010-methodology>
- Grant, J. M., Mottet, L. M., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J. L., Keisling, M. (2011). *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.
- Griffin, P. (2007). Overview: Sexism, heterosexism, and transgender oppression. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, P. Griffin (eds), *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (2nd edition, pp. 167–172). New York: Routledge.
- Kessler, S. J. (2002). *Lessons from the Intersexed*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Meyerowitz, J. (2002). *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Namaste, V. K. (2000). *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (2011). *Jurisdictions with Explicitly Transgender-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws*. Retrieved May 5, 2012, from http://thetaskforce.org/reports_and_research/all_jurisdictions_w_pop_10_11.pdf
- National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (2012). *State Non-Discrimination Laws in the U.S.* Retrieved from http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/issue_maps/non_discrimination_1_12_color.pdf
- Nestle, J., Howell, C., Wilchins, R. (eds). (2002). *Genderqueer: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Prosser, J. (1998). *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Raymond, J. (1979). *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. London: The Women's Press.
- Spade, D. (2011). *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press.
- Stanley, E. A., Smith, N. (eds). (2011). *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Stone, S. (1991). The empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto. In J. Epstein, K. Strauss (eds), *In Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (pp. 280–304). New York: Routledge.
- Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender History*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- Sylvia Rivera Law Project (2007). "It's war in here": A Report on the Treatment of Transgender and Intersex People in New York State Men's Prisons. Retrieved April 26, 2009, from <http://srlp.org/files/warinhere.pdf>
- Transgender Europe (2011). *Transgender Europe's Trans Murder Monitoring Project Reveals 221 Killings of Trans People in the Last 12 Months*. http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en_US/tvt-project/tmm-results/tdor2011.htm
- Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham, NC: Duke.