

## **‘Transparent:’ Negotiating Parenthood as a Transgendered Individual**

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From the moment that Clare informed the class part of our evaluation was developing and presenting a conference paper I was thrilled. Throughout my undergraduate, I presented papers at several national conferences. Because of my previous experience, I thought the process would be anxiety and stress free. However, I believe it *is* because of my previous experience I placed more pressure upon myself to perform well and reveal new information about a topic that gets undervalued attention. I found myself panicking with writers block and unable to feel like I produced any thoughts that brought value to my critique of the sex-gender-sexuality system and negotiation of parenthood by transgender individuals. Nevertheless, I reworked and reworded until I was comfortable enough on the day of the conference to present my work. Despite my reservations, I enjoyed presenting at the conference because of the way that the audience engaged with my work and gave positive critique which ultimately helped shape my final paper.

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I stumbled across this topic as I was getting my haircut by Greygory who is a barber at Open Barbers in north east London. At the time, he asked me the dreaded question of what I was going to do my dissertation on and I blabbered on about how I think maternity and paternity shouldn't be fixed to a certain body. He remarked that one of the most frustrating aspects for him in the trans-community is that trans-men are seen as stepping away from the desire to parent or having no desire to have children. After a satisfying cut, I left the barber shop and weeks later that comment was still rattling around in my head. Thanks to this conference I am now able to contribute to an area of limited attention. Throughout this paper I am going to analyse the ways in which transgender individuals negotiate parenthood.

First, I just want to clarify what I mean by transgender. There are a variety of definitions of who a transgender individual is and what they embody. For the purposes of this essay, I am using transgender in the broadest sense of the term. It can include individuals who have gone through sexual reassignment surgery, those who have gone through top surgery, but not bottom (or vice versa), or those who have not gone through any surgery at all, but consider themselves the opposite gender they were born with, or possibly they identify as no gender at all. So from hence forward, I will be using the term 'trans' unless specifically referring to an individual who self-identifies in a different way.

Whilst in the early stages of conducting my research I quickly realised this project was going to take much more digging than I anticipated. It was relatively easy to find articles and journals about trans experiences because, in the 1990s, there was a major push for transgender activism. According to scholar Constantina Papoulias (2013: 231), "transgender activism forged a challenge to hegemonic gender binaries and their naturalising force and invoked the possibility of fluid mobile and provisional enactments of gender." Yet, it seems this activism was often lumped and lost in the grand scheme of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual. The erasure of trans became

more evident when I began researching LGBT parenting. More often than not, it was just lesbian parenting, with some gay, little to no bisexual, and definitely no trans. The examples I most commonly found featured lesbian and gay parents with footnoted bisexuals and transgender parents. Sally Hines (2006: 363) argued that “while lesbian and gay parenting sparks much debate within contemporary society, there is a cultural reticence to speak about trans people as parents, which leaves the practices of transgender parenting largely invisible.” After narrowing my search to ‘transgender parenting’ or ‘transsexual parenting’ several studies were recommended, but the studies mainly focused on what a parent should do if their *child* is trans. Hines (2006: 355) points out, however, that “studies of same-sex intimacy and analyses of gender relations have yet to take account of the specificities of transgender.” This process draws attention to the limitations of the sex/gender/sexuality system.

Luckily, in the conversation I had with my barber, he referred me to a zine titled, *Original Plumbing*. *Original Plumbing (OP)* is a trans-male quarterly magazine that is created and independently published by Amos Mac and Rocco Kayiatos (2011) out of Brooklyn, New York, USA. This issue of *OP* focused not just on individual trans-men and their experiences, but instead, included interviews with families of trans-men. The range of participants featured within the zine included biological parents, families of choice, partners, and children. In one section titled, “Family Profiles,” co-authors Mac and Kayiatos (2011: 19) used The Annual Philadelphia Trans-Health Conference to set up a photo booth and “invited attendees from across the continent to pose for portraits and to talk about what makes their family solid.”

Therefore, this is currently an ongoing project of a larger essay, but my preliminary research is highlighting certain patterns. I am finding that trans-parenting can reify gender norms through ways of participating in parenthood, and therefore, help perpetuate rigid fantasies of maternal and paternal roles. Yet, on the flip side of the coin, trans-parenting is questioning sex and gender norm associations to the body through the ways in which they negotiate said parenting.

According to various scholars like Anthony Giddens (1992) and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1998) there has been a transformation of intimacies that demarcates a shift in the lived experiences of the so-called nuclear family. No longer are the majority of families headed by the traditional conceptualisations of a 'man' who supports his family through economic means and a 'woman' who provides a 'happy home' through care taking of their two and a half children. However, despite knowing of the reconfigurations of the family there is a strong perpetuation of the fantasy that 'men' work and 'women' care. The breadwinner/homemaker model regulates and demands that there are certain ways in which a household can ideally function. Even though we know there is a proliferation of different households (single parent household, LGBT co-parenting, more than two parents, young parents, no children etc.), they are often excluded from the institutions that surround and perpetuate the fantasy of the breadwinner/homemaker model. In tandem with the model, there are strict codes of parenting that link femininity and mothering to women, and masculinity and fathering to men. These connections just like the 'home' itself are extremely regulated.

In my quest to illuminate trans-parenting, there are multiple examples of trans-parents negotiating the unyielding norms of fatherhood and motherhood. While trying to negotiate such roles, their trans identities seem to get lost, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and to disappear into the gender binary through parenting standards, thus reaffirming said binary. A well-known example is that of Thomas Beatie. Beatie was not the first man to get pregnant; however, his was the first case to explode throughout the media. During an interview with Oprah Winfrey, it was demonstrated how Beatie's identity as a transman was erased because of his pregnancy (Riggs, 2014). Beatie was often asked questions of his past regarding his then female body, which was used in the interview to demonstrate to the audience that simply because Beatie refers to himself as a man he is 'truly' a woman because of his biological genitals and previous experience with femaleness. Winfrey argued that his status as a 'pregnant man' was actually one

of a 'pregnant woman' (Riggs, 2014: 165). Such traumatic processes are said to occur because of the ways in which trans individuals threaten the gender binary, and so trans people are plighted for their desires. Riggs (2014: 166) affirms this by calling attention to

the normative status of a gender binary in which only women are presumed to have wombs, and only men are presumed to have penises, but also [where] the attributes associated with pregnancy and childbirth (i.e. a 'maternal instinct') are presumed to co-exist only within a body that is not only physically marked as female, but also psychologically marked as female.

Expecting trans-male parent, Syrus has stated that being pregnant seemed to erase any previous understanding of his preferred gender pronouns, and that so many among his friends, coworkers and family "have started to switch (either accidentally or on purpose) back to using 'she,' 'her,' and 'pregnant lady' to refer to [him], despite the fact that they respected [his] chosen gender pronouns for the past 10 years" (Mac and Kayiatos, 2011: 23). Both Beatie and Syrus are subjected to assumptions and accusations of femaleness because of the strict associations between femaleness and motherhood, despite Beatie and Syrus acknowledging they were once respected and passed as 'men.' This might occur because, as scholar Julie L. Nagoshi (2014: 435) highlights, "bodies are involved more actively, more intimately, and more intricately in social processes than theory has usually allowed. Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct – the body is a participant in generating social practice." Nagoshi (2014) is here calling attention to the difficulty trans-parents have with negotiating parenthood because sometimes their embodiment of parenthood requires an erasure of their trans-identity due to the fixed associations between motherhood, pregnancy, and woman or even fatherhood, pregnancy and man.

It is at this point where I want to argue that, if trans-identities were not erased alongside their parent-identities, then it would provide another opportunity for which we can try to lessen the ‘stickiness’ of sex and gender to certain bodies. Hines’s (2006: 368) contribution to the area of trans-parenting has pointed out that it is not that “cross-gender identifying men and women” were never parents but, rather, that today there are more individuals self-identifying as trans-parents. One way that trans-parents try to negotiate parenthood while being explicit about their trans-identity is through openness with their children and community (Hines, 2006). Living as an out trans-individual has its difficulties and one difficulty is ‘naming’ because of the cultural meanings of terms like ‘mom’ and ‘dad.’ Ky and his 2 year old daughter Sol, for example, remain fluid in their naming practices (Mac and Kayiatos, 2011). Instead of dictating how Sol should refer to Ky, Ky allows Sol to call Ky whatever she likes. Ky states, “I’m not particular about being called ‘dad’ or ‘he’ at least for now, so I’ve never really attempted to persuade Sol to call me male names, but she’s so smart, she’ll say things like ‘good boy, mom mom!’ if I do something she likes or she’ll call me ‘the handsome mama’” (Mac and Kayiatos, 2011: 16). This relaxed relationship of naming between Ky and Sol shows the ability for trans-individuals to be a parent without their trans-identity erased. Moreover, by exposing children and adults to non-traditional uses of traditional cultural terms like ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ helps with breaking the connections between ‘mom’ and woman and ‘dad’ and man.

Another example is of Dan and his 9-year-old son (Hines, 2006). Dan birthed his son prior to his female to male transition because Dan felt becoming a mother would make him feel more like a woman. However, with Dan’s continued anxieties about his gender identity disorder after his commitment to parenting Dan decided it was best for him to transition. Dan felt it was better to be open and honest with his son about his trans-identity than “have his son live with a parent on tranquilisers” (Hines, 2006: 364). Hines (2006: 364) argues, “thus rather than seeing transitioning as problematising his relationship with his son, Dan began to see it as a process which would enable them to have a more successful relationship.” This potential problem was

avoided by allowing Dan's son time to process the idea that he "wouldn't go to school on Monday morning with me (Dan) as his mum and pick him up [that] night as his dad" (Hines, 2006: 364). Dan stresses the importance of not just switching from mom to dad or whatever the order, but "suggested that their child [and others within their community] call them by their new first name or a nickname, which was often a variation of their pre-transition name" (Hines, 2006: 366). This too can be connected to the societal preconceived notions of who 'moms' and 'dads' are and what they should and should not do. According to a study by White and Etner in 2007, "children who can vary the words they use to identify the transitioned parent tend to better manage emotional reactions" (cited in Faccio et al., 2013: 1058). Dan's openness with his son and their community has allowed for an opportunity for individuals to become aware of a transgender individual who parents. The importance of such openness about trans-parenting has been foregrounded by Elizabeth Riley et al. (2013: 253) who argue that, if gender-variant children had access to "visible transgender role models [it] would ensure children 'see a future for themselves'", thus providing access to a healthier childhood. Moreover, it was stated that adults who see successful portrayals of trans individuals become aware "that [gender variance] is a part of the normal variety of life" (Riley et al., 2013: 256).

As I aforementioned, this is just the beginning of what I wish to further develop. I wish to raise more awareness that the T in LGBT is often silent. Because of this, trans-identity is often lost with trying to negotiate inclusion and exclusion, and parenthood is not an exception. It is my opinion that, despite growing numbers of 'families of choice,' the persistence of recognising and regulating male bodies as fathers and female bodies as mothers stands strong. Moreover, what one can or cannot do as a father or as a mother is even stronger. My early stages of research suggest that in a variety of ways trans individuals who parent do not necessarily transgress the assumption of what bodies can and cannot be a mother or father, but it does suggest there are early stages of renegotiation. Possibly, the erasure of trans-identity in parenthood occurs because the discourse of parenting implies rigid sex/gender roles. As seen with Beatie and Syrus, their

preferred gender identities were ignored when their bodies were deemed to be female due to their pregnancies. Therefore, their negotiations of parenthood in unintentional ways reaffirm ideas of parenting due to the imposed ideologies of who can and cannot be pregnant. However, studies suggest that the more trans-parents become less 'transparent,' the more children and adults will be exposed to gender variance thus hopefully allowing for greater fluidity and mobility for sex/gender, embodiment and parenting (Riley et al., 2013; Hines, 2006; Faccio et al., 2013).

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