

Lacanian Analysis and Transsexuality: Take 2

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One of the most important legacies of Freudian psychoanalysis lies in the art of listening to the unconscious productions of its subjects: what Jacques Lacan named the discourse of analysis. Based on Freud's method as discovered in his early work with hysterics, and developed over the course of his life in writings on technique, analytic discourse remains vital to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. For Lacan, analytic discourse represents both the *inverse* of a discourse of mastery which is dominated by the one supposed to know, as well as a turn away from the discourse of bureaucracy which is dominated by the privileging of established knowledge or expertise. His delineation of these discourses helps us make sense of Freud's insistence on forgoing any presumed knowledge on the part of the analyst in favour of privileging the words, dreams, thoughts and associations of the analysand. Analytic discourse offers a means of making sense of the Other that can be applied to aspects of social life outside the clinic as well.

In this essay I suggest that in some recent theorizations of transsexual (and transgender) experiences that are psychoanalytically informed, the discourse of analysis works to produce a better understanding of transsexual subjects than in the past, when analytic discourse was replaced by discourses of expertise. I use the term "transsexual" to refer to those who identify with a gender not assigned at birth, and who often seek to alter their bodies to accord with their gender identity; and "transgender" to refer to a broader group with various other kinds of non-normative identifications and with which some transsexuals may also identify. The history of the relationship of psychoanalysts to transsexuals was described as exceedingly fraught as early as

1974 when Ethel Spector Person and Lionel Ovsey remarked that transsexuals' resistance to psychoanalysis was a reasonable response to patronizing, moralizing and stigmatizing attitudes toward them held by many analysts.¹ More recently, this observation has been reiterated by psychoanalyst and theorist Patricia Gherovici. She writes, "in both subtle and brutal ways, psychoanalysis has a history of coercive hetero-normalization and pathologization of non-normative sexualities and genders."² Indeed, as Gherovici and I have both pointed out, many analysts have been either threatened or puzzled by transsexuals, and often have been unsuccessful in concealing their transphobic views.³ Such views are based on what Gherovici claims is "a selective reinterpretation of the Freudian texts" or, more forcefully, on what she calls "reductive distortions" issuing from a "homophobic and transphobic history" (3).

Working within the Lacanian tradition, Gherovici distances herself from the now classic essay on transsexuality by Catherine Millot.⁴ This is important because despite Millot's concern for the mental health of transsexuals, she nevertheless makes questionable assumptions about the meaning of transition and about the outcomes of surgical interventions on the body. Moreover, Millot's book was not based on an extensive psychoanalysis of trans subjects, but on discussions with some trans people and on some early selected texts. I have argued that her fear that sex change surgery confirms a psychotic fantasy in (some) transsexuals is not well founded; for Millot, these transsexuals embrace an idealized gender position beyond sexual difference that is doomed to fail (*Debates* 108). Furthermore, while her text is not always read with care, especially by those who may well feel implicated in Millot's branding of some transsexuals as psychotic, one can understand how it may be considered transphobic. I would argue that the disappointing history produced by various psychoanalytic traditions could be said to represent the application of a bureaucratic discourse that claims to know what transsexuality means.

Drawing on the work of other analysts and psychoanalytic social theorists, Gherovici makes the point that psychoanalysis has something else to offer when it manages to divest itself of its normalizing and discriminatory history.

My own point is that we are witnessing a second take on the relationship of psychoanalysis to transsexuality, one that displaces the previous, questionable psychoanalytic interpretations (found in all schools of thought, including Lacanian) and that turns to a more suitable analytic discourse. “Take 1” would include *Horsexe* by Catherine Millot as well as elaborations and discussions of the paradigm set out in that book. Since the late 1990s, there have been critiques of this theory not only by transsexuals, who of course are often critical of psychoanalytic theories, but by Lacanian psychoanalytic social theorists, including myself. I develop a critique of Millot’s perspective, emphasizing the ways in which Lacanian psychoanalysis might be better employed in theorizing the psychic complexity of trans subjects. Beginning with a set of universal propositions for theorizing *any* human subjectivity, most importantly the idea that acquiring a sexed body is a complex social and relational psychosexual process with unconscious dimensions that need to be analyzed in terms of their meaning and structure rather than normalized, pathologized or ignored, I argue that transsexuality ought to be read as a particular way of coming to inhabit a body. Moreover, I show how transsexuals’ accounts, particularly Jay Prosser’s theorization of “body narratives,” contribute to our understanding of the specificity of transsexual embodiment.⁵ As such, I regard my work, along with that of others, as establishing the necessary critical groundwork for alternative ways of engaging with Lacanian theory.

By “Take 2” I refer to recent, Lacanian-informed approaches to transsexuality that will be discussed below with reference to what I consider to be three of its significant proponents. I

suggest that this turn represents a more valuable approach than the first interpretation of trans, one that offers a better understanding of transsexual subjects. Moreover, I suggest that a better grasp of what is at stake for transsexual subjects promises not only to counter previous, arguably transphobic accounts, but also to enable appropriate support for those who seek medical interventions. It also has the potential to alter therapeutic and other social practices, as well as to challenge prejudicial attitudes. In addressing the theme of what is valuable in the legacy of Freud, my argument is that this turn represents the implementation of an analytic discourse proper to psychoanalysis, one that was clarified by Lacan. Moreover, I am arguing that *if* normative preconceptions of (trans)sexuality are abandoned and *when* there is a commitment to hearing what transsexual subjects have to say about their experiences of transition, then psychoanalysis may be useful for thinking about processes of re-embodiment in the context of the complexity and particularity of transsexual subjectivity.

This second take will be examined here with a focus on three psychoanalytic theorists – Shannon Carlson, Gherovici, and Oren Gozlan – who employ Lacanian theory to investigate sexuality, subjectivity and desire in relation to transsexuality. These theorists support Lacan’s reading of sexuality as rooted in the polymorphous perversity of infantile sexuality, and in sexual drives and objects that are *not* gender-specific. Equally important is Lacan’s view that the sexual positions of masculinity and femininity are taken up based on *unconscious fantasy* and not anatomy. While Freud sometimes appears to take reproductive genitality as the ideal model of sexuality, Lacan rejects this norm in his famous proclamation that “the relation between the sexes does not take place.”⁶ What this means is that there is no natural complementarity, no binary opposition based on the “presence or absence of differential traits,” but rather an “irreducible two” such that “two doesn’t merge into one.”⁷ Emphasizing the instability and

uncertainty of sexual identity, Lacanian theorists maintain that rigid and normalizing constructions of gender mandated by the social must be understood as something other than sexual difference. In what follows, I will first describe what new knowledge these psychoanalytic theorists produce in the field of transsexuality, and then offer some suggestions concerning what this new knowledge might mean for the field of trans studies.

In an exceptional article, Shanna Carlson argues that psychoanalysis and gender studies have a good deal to offer one another, at least when they manage to overcome two false assumptions: 1) That “gender” must accord with unconscious sexual positions; and 2) that Lacan’s theory of sexuation prescribes an inevitable heterosexuality.⁸ Where gender refers to conventional meanings attributed to masculinity and femininity based on a popular belief that such meanings derive from the bodies of men and women, sexual difference as Lacan describes it refers to two positions which one might unconsciously adopt regardless of anatomy or gender attribution. As Carlson puts it, sexual difference refers to “two different logics ... two different approaches to the Other, two different stances with respect to desire, and (at least) two different types of jouissance” (64). That is, for Lacanian theorists, one’s identification as a woman or a man is not derived from one’s biology, nor does it necessarily conform to the gender one is ascribed by one’s parents. Taking up a sexed position entails a certain kind of loss on both sides of the divide, despite the fact that loss or lack has often been attributed to the feminine side. And far from prescribing heterosexuality, Lacan’s theory of sexuation enables us to account for the sexual diversity that exists. One’s sexual positioning as woman or man need not coincide with one’s ascribed gender, nor does it dictate which bodies or genders might become one’s preferred object of desire. Sympathetic both to psychoanalysis and to the concerns of queer and feminist gender theory, Carlson explores transsexual and transgender identities as “expressions of the

logic of sexual difference” (64). She argues that the certainty with which (many) transsexual subjects identify as men or women is psychically no different from that of nontranssexual subjects. However, because it is widely believed that bodies, not psyches, are the proper measure of one’s gender, transsexual claims to gender certainty are often regarded as illegitimate and transsexuals are oppressed.

Transgender subjects occupy a different position than transsexuals with respect to sexual difference according to Carlson, although some transsexuals may locate themselves there as well. Making no claims to gender certainty, transgendered subjects are positioned by Carlson on the side of the feminine. Like hysterics who pose the question “Am I a man or am I a woman?” – an either/or question – Carlson considers that transgender subjects express the pain of being a divided subject. As such they suffer from the *loss* of certainty, a certainty that is socially expected of all of us, at least in contemporary Western societies. Carlson’s interesting claim is that transgender subjects are excluded or silenced precisely because they reveal both that gender certainty is a false solution to the inevitable human encounter with lack, and that sexual difference means a *loss for every subject*. Indeed, she asserts that “there is something transgendered about the human subject, and this transgenderism transcends notions of gender” (66). In other words, a gender identity that one purports to be clear, certain, or true represents a sort of compensation for the uncertainty that haunts every human subject and is typically denied. Transgender persons nevertheless have the potential to expose through their suffering what discourses of gender mask, provided that one is able to hear what they have to say which, Carlson suggests, carries significant transformative power. And paying attention to what trans people have to say and/or write about their own experience clearly informs Carlson’s insight into the different dynamics she describes.

Without exacerbating the tensions that currently exist in the trans community between those transgender subjects who embrace the uncertainty of gender identity and those transsexual subjects whose lives depend upon an equally passionate embrace of certainty, Carlson's analysis reveals an underlying difference between the two. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the point is to understand that while their respective positions both reveal important truths about our taken-for-granted views about bodies, sexual difference, and gender identities, their *desires* are quite different. I have argued at length that the important point from the perspective of trans studies is to be able to hear and respect these different desires, and to avoid valuing one at the expense of the other.

In a similar spirit of psychoanalytic inquiry, Gherovici agrees with Carlson, as well as with trans theorists Kate Bornstein and Patrick Califia, that transsexual claims to gender certainty are not so different from those of nontranssexuals.⁹ In her view, such claims on the part of transsexuals cannot simplistically be reduced to a fantasy of being beyond or outside sex. Here, Gherovici takes issue with Catherine Millot's assumption that transsexuals occupy a psychotic position based on the fantasy of a sex that is not lacking, a sex that is imagined to be complete and outside sexual difference. Millot was concerned that the demand for sex change represented an impossible desire to escape not just the sex one has been ascribed, but the reality of sexual difference itself. Millot viewed becoming the "other" sex through surgical intervention to be an untenable fantasy of escape from a position of loss to an idealized position of fullness beyond human desire. Charles Shepherdson clarified what was at stake in this fantasy of psychic redemption: a position of plenitude outside language and outside of desire.¹⁰ Sandy Stone anticipated this concern, which has been discussed by myself and Gayle Salamon in our work on trans embodiment.¹¹ Although Katrina Roen and I argued in the late 1990s against Millot's view

that surgery represents a harmful confirmation of the fantasy of occupying an idealized sexual position beyond lack,¹² it wasn't until a decade later that Gherovici explicitly challenged her fellow psychoanalysts to abandon Millot's generalized assumption that most transsexuals are psychotic.

I believe that Gherovici's intervention marks an important change in the history of the relationship of psychoanalysts to transsexuals. As we shall see, it goes beyond simply correcting the psychoanalytic accounts of Millot and others that have been unsympathetic or even hostile to trans people to varying degrees. What enables Gherovici's intervention is not simply her ability to question her own presuppositions and prejudices, although the capacity for self-critique is rare enough for all of us, and never easily achieved. But it is also possible for Gherovici to challenge existing psychoanalytic knowledge because she listens to what transsexuals have to say and/or write about themselves. I suggest that her reading of theoretical texts and her work with transsexual analysands enacts a discourse of analysis that is both appropriate to her practice as an analyst and vital to producing a new understanding of transsexual experience. But how does her analysis proceed?

Gherovici creatively extends Lacan's concept of the *sinthome* to transsexual projects for reembodiment or transition. Almost a homonym for "symptom," the word "*sinthome*" combines the words saint and man to refer to a kind of generalized model of the symptom that is a way to deal with what Lacan calls the absence of the sexual relation. For Freud, a symptom is a compromise formation between a repressed drive element and a repressing agency, one that enables satisfaction, even when it interferes with our conscious self-image and aspirations. And for Lacan, the ego, including body image and gender identity, is the typical symptom of humans.¹³ His concept of the *sinthome* suggests that it is possible through analysis and/or writing

to bring about a subjective change that replaces a dysfunctional symptom with a new compromise that better favours life, love and work. Gherovici endorses Lacan's view that there is "no subject without a sinthome" ("Sex Change" 14), a reconstructive and reparative project of the subject that enables one "to tolerate the absence of the sexual relation" (12). This means that for all of us, the task is to deal with loss, the demand for the object that will satisfy our desire and that we imagine, wrongly, the other possesses. The sinthome is what we devise to make good the inevitable loss that can feel intolerable. Moreover, because sexual positions are not dictated by anatomy but rather represent two different responses to loss, transsexual transition is read by Gherovici as a sinthome that reveals the error of supposing that having or lacking the penis determines one's position as a man or a woman. According to her,

this common error can be what the rectification proposed by some transsexuals is all about ... because for the unconscious somebody with a penis can be a woman or someone without a penis can be a man... Since the unconscious has no representation of masculinity or femininity, we cannot speak with certainty in terms of sexual identity of being a man or a woman, but only of an assurance, a happy uncertainty. (13-14)

Gherovici relies on the theory of trans authors such as Jay Prosser and the words of her own trans analysands to contend that it is the trans narrative itself, the writing of one's transformation, that marks the sinthome for transsexual subjects. Employing an analytic discourse enables her to question previous psychoanalytic views of sex change as "either a treatment or a cure" (12). Rather, the transsexual sinthome is a creative answer to an untenable relation of self to body, one that "helps reclaim the body and regulate jouissance" (*Gender* 234). For transsexuals, then, both writing and surgical intervention are part of the construction of a liveable position and are read as a creative solution to a dysfunctional position, not the confirmation of a pathological fantasy.

Psychoanalyst Oren Gozlan takes up Gherovici's application of the *sinthome* to transsexuality in reflecting on his own work with trans analysands. Located at the place "where surgery and writing intersect," the transsexual *sinthome* is also read by Gozlan as a *solution* to suffering that goes beyond a defensive illusion of unity that would deny lack, subjectivity and desire.¹⁴ In his view, "transsexual writing is a way in which transsexual subjects embody 'sexual difference' by rewriting a story of origin that invents themselves, and thus releases the fantasized hold of the Other's determinations" (48). As such, it marks a departure from the symptomatic idealization and envy of the other sex that represses sexual difference, and that Gozlan recognizes in the suffering of some of his transsexual patients. Read as a *sinthome*, transsexual surgery becomes a way to claim one's desire by giving meaning to one's embodiment. A "self-created fiction" (47), Gozlan suggests that the transsexual body fashioned through surgery and narration enables one to assume a position as man or woman, instead of being the object of the Other. And like some trans writers, he describes transitioning as a "rebirthing" that entails a "new narrative" of the subject, a rewriting that creates a gap between self and Other and that facilitates satisfaction precisely because the Other is absent (48).

This gap or inscription of lack is a *signifying act* that Gozlan and Gherovici compare to what Lacan calls "the analytic act": a transformative process that enables desire to function. Importantly for Gozlan, transsexual surgery can play a role in this act of signification that brings an end to the fantasy of union with, and/or subjection to, the Other. In his work with Aron, a transsexual patient, Gozlan notes the effects of transsexual surgery as they are described to him in analysis:

For Aron, surgery perhaps began as an unconscious way to close the possibility of being sucked into the Other's grip. In a phantastical sense, the transsexual body can no longer merge with the parental image. Aron was aware, at some level, of the phantasy that he could not be usurped by his parents' needs in his transsexual body. He would

not be an object of desire for his parents in the sense that, at the level of phantasy, his body could no longer be reduced to the phallic desire of the Other. (49)

No longer existing as an object for the Other's jouissance, but a divided subject who desires in his own right, Aron has to make sense of his scars. For Gozlan, the scar becomes an important "remainder" and "reminder" of separation from the Other, and surgery "becomes an act" in which one "traverses a phantasy of union, giving up the phantasized Other, but having to live with a scar" (49). Extending this metaphor of the scar that marks Aron's surgical re-embodiment, Gozlan speculates that the scar "signifies separation from the mother, a hole that hints at an endless unknown but is also a sign of a wounding impossibility – a point of creation that is borne of destruction, a cut that creates an external reality." Moreover, as scar tissue, his post-surgery genitals come to represent "a novel way of working through impossibility." Because the impossibility at stake for Aron and perhaps for other transsexuals as well is a fantasized union with the Other, Gozlan understands the process of transition as entailing "an acceptance of the scar that reveals separation and mending of the memory of the body" (50). Like Gherovici, Gozlan finds the process of transitioning to be a creative project that includes both surgery and narration, a claim that reflects the experience of many transsexual authors.

As the psychoanalytic work of Gherovici and others aims to depathologize transsexuality, there is clearly a new beginning for the relationship between psychoanalysts and transsexuals as well. Gherovici's observation that "transgender people are actually changing the clinical praxis, advancing new ideas for the clinic" ("Sex Change" 9) certainly offers some hope that the previous relationship of mistrust between them can be transformed. As I see it, this hope lies in a commitment to an analytic discourse in which the words and the writing of trans subjects are given the attention they deserve, and the previously established, pathologizing discourses about them are abandoned. Overturning transphobic accounts, the analytic discourses of Carlson,

Gherovici, and Gozlan offers us a new understanding of trans subjects that both derives from and affirms the experiences of many trans persons. It remains to be seen what the impact of this second take will be on the field of trans studies because it is uncertain whether these new theories will be adopted by other analysts, therapists and psychiatrists who currently work with trans persons. Insofar as assessments of psychic health are required to justify and fund medical intervention on trans bodies (a contentious issue, but that is another matter), these new theories offer a way to acknowledge the psychic importance and meaning of transition as a reparative process, not a damaging one. If widely accepted as viable theories, their adoption would have a positive effect on the process of evaluation itself, and thus on those transsexuals who are required to undergo it. My contention here is that the path these theorists have forged is a promising one, a path that mandates respect for the desire to change sex as a *sinthome*, which signifies a positive form of self-transformation. Compared to existing theories and practices that fail to understand trans persons and that read their subjective position as necessarily harmful, the emphasis on respect for the narratives of trans people, and on the positive signification of their transitions, represents a significant move in the right direction.

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Notes

¹ Ethel Spector Person and Lionel Ovesey, "The Transsexual Syndrome in Males: Secondary Transsexualism," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 28 (1974): 174-193.

² Patricia Gherovici, "Psychoanalysis Needs a Sex Change," *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 7.1 (2011): 3. Further references are incorporated into the text.

³ See Patricia Elliot, "A Psychoanalytic Reading of Transsexual Embodiment," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2. 4 (2001): 295-325; and *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist*

Theory: Contested Sites (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), p. 108. Further references to this book are incorporated into the text.

⁴ Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality* (New York: Autonomedia, 1990).

⁵ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), p. 138.

⁷ Mladen Dolar, "One Divides into Two," *efflux journal* 33 (March 2012): 9. Sexuality may come to attach itself to relations of love and gender identity which are socially constructed, but according to Lacan these are substitutes for the non-relation of the two (regardless of gender).

⁸ Shanna Carlson, "Transgender Subjectivity and the Logic of Sexual Difference," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2010): 46-69, p. 60. Further references are incorporated into the text.

⁹ Patricia Gherovici, *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 10-11. Further references are incorporated into the text. See also Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and Patrick Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Charles Shepherdson, "The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex," *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 158-184.

¹¹ Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 280-304; Gayle Salamon, "The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15 3 (2004), pp. 95-122, and *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹² Patricia Elliot and Katrina Roen, "Transgenderism and the Question of Embodiment: Promising Queer Politics?" *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4.2 (1998): 231-261.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p. 16.

¹⁴ Oren Gozlan, "Transsexual Surgery: A Novel Reminder and a Navel Remainder," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 20 (2011): 45-52, p. 48. Further references are incorporated into the text.