“Either/Or” and “Both/Neither”:

Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics

Katrina Roen (2002)

Presented by Elliott Stegall
**discursive** \(\text{dis-KUR-siv}\), *adjective*:

1. Passing from one topic to another; ranging over a wide field; digressive; rambling.

2. Utilizing, marked by, or based on analytical reasoning -- contrasted with intuitive.

*Discursive* comes from Latin *discurrere*, "to run in different directions, to run about, to run to and fro," from *dis-*, "apart, in different directions" + *currere*, "to run."
Gender:

Etymology: Middle English *gendre*, from Anglo-French *genre*, *gendre*, from Latin *gener-*, *genus* birth, race, kind, gender -- more at KIN

1. a: a subclass within a grammatical class (as noun, pronoun, adjective, or verb) of a language that is partly arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics (as shape, social rank, manner of existence, or sex) and that determines agreement with and selection of other words or grammatical forms
   b: membership of a word or a grammatical form in such a subclass
   c: an inflectional form showing membership in such a subclass

2. a: SEX <the feminine *gender*>
   b: the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex
Gender…

A little more than kin, and less than kind.

William Shakespeare, "Hamlet" Act 1 scene 2
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyB_1wjbc_s
Transgender (IPA: [ˈtrænzˌdʒɛndər], from trans (Latin for across) and gender (English for kind) is a general term applied to a variety of individuals, behaviors, and groups involving tendencies that diverge from the normative gender role (woman or man) commonly, but not always, assigned at birth, as well as the role traditionally held by society.
Transgender is the state of one's "gender identity" (self-identification as male, female, both or neither) not matching one's "assigned gender" (identification by others as male or female based on physical/genetic sex). Transgender does not imply any specific form of sexual orientation — transgender people may identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual or asexual.
The current definition for transgender remains in flux, but some definitions are:

- "People who were assigned a gender, usually at birth and based on their genitals, but who feel that this is a false or incomplete description of themselves."

- "Non-identification with, or non-presentation as, the gender one was assigned at birth."
Roen’s definitions:

- Transgenderism: a political positioning that draws from postmodern notions of fluidity for both bodies and genders.
- Transexuality: a psychologically defined state of being that assumes the preexistence of two sexes between which one may transition.
**Time Richard Corliss:** In a style of agitated naturalism, Jordan examines poignant matters of life and death, sex and friendship, duty and loyalty, freedom and bondage, manhood and womanhood and all the ambiguous areas in between. [30 Nov 1992]

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lKUpex4kVw&mode=related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lKUpex4kVw&mode=related&search=)

Read the script to *The Crying Game*: It won the Academy Award

CONTEMPORARY (RADICAL) TRANSGENDER POLITICS

• Postmodern Conceptions of Subjectivity
• Queer Understandings of Sexuality and Gender
• Radical Politics of Transgression
• Poststructuralist Deconstruction of Binaries (man/woman and mind/body)

Note: according to these politics, passing may mean falling prey to the forces of “gender oppression.” Consequently, subversive crossing, public and politically strategic transgendering, is seen as one step toward the following goals:
Goals of Contemporary (Radical) Transgender Politics

- Gender transgression
- Gender transcendence
- Ridding the world of “gender oppression”
LIBERAL TRANSSEXUAL POLITICS

- More concerned with the human rights of the transsexual
- Access to medical services, ID papers, marriage licenses
- Transition into “woman” or “man”
- Likely seek sex reassignment surgery and pass full time
Political Hierarchy

- These two strands of transgender politics have resulted in the construction of a political hierarchy.
- Crossing is more trendy, radical, exciting, and politically worthy than “passing.”
- Those who choose to “pass” are encouraged to “come out of the closet” and live openly as transpeople (Bornstein).
- Roen notes that postmodern “transgender theorizing” reinforces the political hierarchy.
Roen’s research comes from interviews with transgender and transsexual people where it appears that each side is guilty of ostracizing the other. Some are considered “real” transsexuals while others are deemed merely crossdressers. Those who are “in the closet” and wish to pass without public attention are derided for “false consciousness.”
From this dichotomy, Roen derives her title: “Either/Or” and “Both/Neither”

♀ “Both/Neither refers to a transgender position of refusing to fit within categories of woman and man.

♂ “Either/Or refers to a transsexual imperative to pass convincingly as either a man or a woman.

♀ Roen wonders whether such positions and theorizing can overcome an “us and them” hierarchy, as in Bornstein’s categories of “gender outlaws” vs. “gender defenders.”
• “To attempt to divide us into rigid categories…is like trying to apply the laws of solids to the state of fluids: it’s our fluidity that keeps us in touch with each other. It’s our fluidity and the principles that attend that constant state of flux that could create an innovative transgender community.”
• “…passing becomes the outward manifestation of shame and capitulation. Passing becomes silence. Passing becomes invisibility. Passing becomes lies. Passing becomes self-denial”
• “When you’re sitting in a room full of people in dresses who are trying to look stunning—trying to look nice—and there’s this bony person sitting there with a balding head…you kind of think ‘My God, what are you doing?’ ‘Wanna take you out and shoot you because you know amongst yourselves that you are trying to maintain a standard and she’s not pulling it off.”
• “One of the other transsexuals came in and the first thing she said to me was ‘go back in the closet!”
• “It used to be that we were all gender trash together…when we started to get empowered for having sex change surgery all of a sudden the distinction between post-op and pre-op became extremely important. As a post-operative, you got certain privileges and power. Essentially, surgery for me breaks down for me as a class and race issue.
• “I identify with just being me…just for the reason that gender changes and there’s no point in categorizing myself as this, that, or the other. I just go with the flow.”
• “I know that I’m a combination of both, but it’s not as if I’m going to go around with a sign on my head with ‘transsexual’ on it. All onlookers are going to perceive me as one or the other. To them, there is no transgender option. For them, there are just the two choices. But for me, there is a private third choice, and that’s a combination of the two.”
• “Being out and proud versus passing has become the measure of the political consciousness and commitment of transgendered people, but the option of being out of the closet without serious repercussions in their lives is still not possible for many.”
RuPaul Andre Charles: "You can call me he. You can call me she. You can call me Regis and Kathie Lee; I don't care!"
Other films dealing with this topic:
Conclusions:

• Transgenderism is a political movement seeking to challenge the belief that every person can be categorized simply as one of two sexes.
• This movement encourages transsexuals to be out as both and neither.
• This stance has come to be privileged over passing as women or men.
• Being out, however, is difficult for all and impossible for many.
• Thus, the transgender activists 1) may fail to take into account the diversity of transpersons and 2) do not accurately conceptualize how agentic subjects maneuver among competing discourses.
• Roen calls for different discourses that would minimize the excluding practices and politics that leave some transpeople without adequate support.
Can’t we all just get along?
Confusing signs on the bathroom doors at McGuire's Irish Pub have played jokes on customers for years, sending women to the men's room and vice versa.

But the father of a girl who was interrupted by a man in the women's room and Florida's Department of Business and Professional Regulation don't find the signs funny.

The agency recently threatened the Panhandle tourist landmark with closure for "Lack of signage properly designating bathrooms."

The state took action after the father filed a complaint, which said his 15-year-old daughter was embarrassed and left the restaurant crying after the bathroom incident.

General Manager Billy Martin has removed the signs at his Destin pub, but left them at his original pub in Pensacola.

"We're not trying to be malicious," Martin told the Northwest Florida Daily News. "It's an Irish joke kind of thing."

More than 3,000 pub patrons have signed a petition to bring the signs back.

The men's room sign has large print that reads "Ladies" and smaller text clarifying women shouldn't go in there because it's the men's room. The women's room has a similar sign.

The signs have been up for 10 years in Destin and 30 years in Pensacola.
Some informative websites:

- Transexual Women’s successes: http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TSsuccesses/TSsuccesses.html

- Kate Bornstein’s website, a quoted writer in the article: http://www.katebornstein.com/KatePages/kate_bornstein.htm

- Take a gender quiz: http://cydathria.com/cgi-bin/SurveyShow.pl?script=gat&page=/ms_donna/ga_test.html

- An extraordinary and massive website, filled with scholarly data: http://www.youth-suicide.com/gay-bisexual/links3a.htm