

# Suppressive Tropes:

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(mis)recognition of transsexuals'  
agency

# *Development of Tropes*

- Susan Stryker: invoking the trope of the ‘monster’ would unsettle an array of gendered and sexualized positions that can be found in the excessive figure of the transgendered (Stryker, 2006).
- ‘born in the wrong body,’
- ‘born in a man’s/woman’s body’
- ‘trapped in the wrong body’

# *My arguments:*

- there is a misapprehension that Cartesian dualism is at the basis of transsexualism, which leaves an inherent cerebral essentialism unquestioned.
- the “wrong body” is utilized to augment a sense of the universal transperson upon which nature has gone somewhat awry.
- the ‘wrong body’ trope in clinical settings universally augments a correct developmental pathway (Meyer, 1982).

# *Methods*

- ESRC funded PhD research that explored the personal, political and medicolegal recognition of transsexuals through the lens of bodily aesthetics.
- Twenty-three people from the UK who identified as both MtF and FtM transsexuals were interviewed using a life history approach. Connell states that “life histories have the capacity to reveal ‘social structures, collectivities and institutional change at the same time as personal life” (Connell, 1991: 143).
- Using discourse analysis I looked at Transgender Community Organization’s (T-CO) websites. I retrieved data by entering the homepage of each T-CO and systematically read the information that was offered. I entered the hyperlinks on each page until each page was exhausted.

# *The pervasiveness of the 'wrong body' trope*

tropes do not refer  
to essences but  
create the matters  
they designate.

# *The pervasiveness of the 'wrong body' trope*

- [i]n all of these reports, journalists documented numerous cases of students who are struggling with their gender identity. From children as young as two years old, through adults aged 50 and older, people reported feeling they were 'born in the wrong body' (The Yes Institute, 2008: 4).

# *The pervasiveness of the 'wrong body' trope*

- males do not represent two discrete populations, homosexual and heterosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separate pigeonholes (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 2003 [1948]: 897).

# *The standards of care*

- [r]eflect[s] various degrees of personal dissatisfaction with sexual identity, sex and gender demarcating body characteristics, gender roles, gender identity, and the perceptions of others. When dissatisfied individuals meet specified criteria in one of two official nomenclatures--the International Classification of Diseases-10 (ICD-10) or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)--they are formally designated as suffering from a gender identity disorder (GID). Some persons with GID exceed another threshold--they persistently possess a wish for surgical transformation of their bodies (Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, 2001: 2).



# *Cartesian thinking*

- “It is whatever *inhabits* the transsexual body that matters [...] The surgeons act *on* the body to ease the pain of the dys/embodied self ‘inside’. Cartesian dualism haunts every turn of phrase here” (Wilton, 2000: 240)

# *Cartesian thinking*

- “transsexual identity is strongly determined by the sexual specificity of the body: if the body had another gender, there would be no transsexualism. Transsexuals are very much determined by their bodies” (van Lenning, 2004: 35).

# *Cartesian thinking*

- “the skin is so fundamental, its functioning is taken so much for granted that no one notices its existence *until the moment* it fails” (Anzieu, 1990: 63-64).

# *Establishing an intersex model with the “wrong body” trope?*

- “[t]ranssexuals, who I believe are intersexed, have the body and genitals of one sex and the brain of the other making reconciliation of their sexual and gender identities problematic. They solve their problems of reconciling, their disparate sexual identity and gender identity, by saying, in essence, ‘Don’t change my mind; change my body’” (Diamond, 2000: 50).

# *Transsexual agency within constraints*

- “locates agency in the context of material and social forces but, in so far as it expresses a principle of differentiation, it replaces a uni-directional determinism with a generative and refractory logic” (McNay, 2000: 162)

# *Transsexual agency within constraints*

- an ethics of ‘transmogrification’ as a way of engendering a non-judgmental attitude to body modification practices (Sullivan, 2006).