

TRANSFIGURATION: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF MALE-TO-FEMALE
TRANSSEXUAL IN GEORGIA

by

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ABSTRACT

The position of transsexual in the West has been constituted in narrative as a specific body and subject position. To be a transsexual is to narrate oneself as a transsexual (Prosser, 1998). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how narrative re/produces a transsexual body and subject. Specifically, I examined the structure of transsexual narratives and the body and subject represented in these narratives.

This study was a narrative analysis (Bal, 1999). The participants for this study were two male-to-female transsexuals living in Georgia. The data consisted of two biographical interviews, two photo elicitations, and one Yahoo profile. The interview data collected were condensed using Bal's (1999) concept of an event and Moustakas's (1994) concept of data reduction. These narratives were then analyzed for their alignment to Roof's (1996) heteronarrative structure – an introduction that commences in the heteronormative and foreshadows the struggles to come, a conclusion that ends in the heteronormative, and a middle which allows homology, or the logic of the perverse. The constituents of the body and subject – essential, inscribed (Foucault, 1980, 1984, 1990), discursive (Butler, 1993, 1997, 1999)

and/or becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of the protagonist in each narrative was also analyzed.

It was found that the position of transsexual was contained within the heteronormative through the structure of narrative. Each narrative erased the homologic possibility of transsexual through concluding in the heterologic, the logic of productivity, capitalism, and the modern alignment of sex/gender/sexual orientation. Additionally, the homology of the middle was an illusion as each instance of ambiguity was quickly pulled back into the heteronormative. It was also found that the presentation of the body and subject followed a heteronarrative structure. Almost exclusively, each narrative began and concluded with an essential self and presented, albeit briefly, an ambiguous body and subject in the middle. Each homologic body and subject was thwarted, however, as it was quickly sutured to the heteronormative.

INDEX WORDS: Transsexual, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Identity, Narrative

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I used narrative analysis, as outlined in *Narratology* (Bal, 1999), to examine how narrative re/produces a transsexual body and subject. Narratology is a structural theory of narrative, wherein narrative is understood as “narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’” (Bal, 1999, p. 3). By analyzing narratives on the level of structure, narratology has the propensity to disclose the ideological underpinnings of a narrative’s construction and illustrate its re/productive function. Such disclosure is of course subjective, as it is formed through the compilation of experiences of my particular body and subject position. Understanding narrative in its broad sense, narratology is suitable for analyzing both written and visual texts; it thus allowed me a comprehensive theory by which to analyze all the data sets of this study – transcribed interviews, photographs, autobiographies, and journal writings.

The participants for this study were two male-to-female transsexuals living in Georgia. Pseudonyms were used for both participants and the names of identifying locations were changed. Michelle, a 23 year old research assistant, who transitioned at the age of 18 years and had no plans to have sex reassignment surgery, and Jessie, a 32 year old professional, who transitioned after graduate school and had sex reassignment surgery in 2002. I was introduced to Michelle through a mutual acquaintance and met Jessie at a gender explorations group. Both of these participants fulfilled the criterion of being from Georgia, self-identified male-to-female transsexuals, and over the age of 18 years. I chose Georgia as the geographical region of this

study due to the paucity of literature examining the Southern transsexual experience, as well as Derrida's (1974) suggestion of beginning where you are. Male-to female transsexuals were chosen for this study because I had greater access to this community and believing there was a qualitative difference between the male-to-female and the female-to-male transsexual experience, I did not want to conflate these two experiences. Only participants over the age of 18 were considered, as I wanted to maintain continuity of developmental status through out my data sets. For the purpose of this study, a male-to-female transsexual is a biological male desiring to change at least some of her bodily characteristics of sex to female characteristics of sex or who finds an incongruence between her "inner" gender and "outer" sex and has a desire to express her gender through alternate significations, such as body modifications, cross dressing, and gender/sex blurred identifications (Lawrence, 2002).

My data set consisted of two case studies, Michelle and Jessie. The case of Michelle consisted of three data sets: an in-depth biographical interview, a photo elicitation interview, and a Yahoo profile. Michelle and I met at a coffee shop in Atlanta, Georgia in October of 2003 for an in-depth biographical interview (Erben, 1998). This interview began with the request, "Tell me your life story." Michelle, speaking for over an hour, told me a fairly rehearsed story of her life. That she had told this story before was evident in the ease in which she told it, her lack of pauses, and the cohesiveness of the story. This rehearsal is important only in it may have the propensity to solidify the structure of her narrative. Michelle's interview data, as with all interview data, contains the words and thoughts of others. These statements must be read as attributions and thus with caution. During this interview, I attempted only to give affirmative signals, nodding my head and saying "um hum" in order to encourage her to continue speaking at length (de Marrais, 2003)

I audio-taped and transcribed the interview with Michelle. After I completed the transcription, I sent her a hard copy to read and make any desired changes. Michelle and I agreed in advance that we would discuss her biographical interview following the photo elicited interview described below. At that time she could request that I make any additions, deletions, or changes to her interview.

In order to gain deeper insight into how Michelle's constituted transsexuality as well as the discursive underpinnings of transsexuality, I used the method of photo elicitation in the tradition of Ewald (1985, 2000). At the conclusion of the biographical interview, I gave Michelle a disposable camera and a self addressed postage paid envelope. I asked her to take pictures answering the question, "What does transsexuality mean to me?" After taking eleven photographs, she mailed the camera to me. I developed two sets of the photographs, one for each of us to keep. We then met at the same coffee shop in Mid-Town in January of 2004 for another long interview. In this interview, I asked Michelle to tell me about the photographs. After deciding that she wanted to speak about them in the same order she took them, she proceeded to tell me about each picture. Following her discussion of the photographs, I turned the conversation to the previous interview. Michelle had no changes she wanted to make to the transcript, but did mention her pleasure at having a hard copy of her story. I had a couple of questions I wanted to ask for clarity. After Michelle answered these queries, the interview was terminated. This interview was audio-taped and transcribed. Both the photographs and Michelle's description of them were understood as narrative (Bal, 1999) and became part of the data set.

Michelle's Yahoo Profile became the third data set in her case. A Yahoo Profile is a web page wherein a Yahoo member can introduce herself to the Yahoo community. The front

page of this site is a pre-formed space in which members insert their photograph and pertinent information about themselves. This site can be linked to a photo album, if the participant desires. Michelle has a photo album consisting of seven dated file folders, 1998-2004. Each of these folders has between 2 and fourteen photographs of her and often her friends. It thus presents a photographic journal of Michelle. I considered this photographic journal a narrative (Bal, 1999). Photographs are a reflection that detaches the subject from itself and places the subject back into meaning through the relations of a storying field (Barthes, 1994), thus capturing a moment of death when the subject knows it is becoming an object (Barthes, 1981). This allows photographs not only to produce “pleasure” (Barthes, 1994), but also to be read between the fissures of the subject as self and object, a simulacra which may denote the social construction of identity within the social constrictions of that choice (Jay, 1994).

The data set for Jessie consisted of two types of data – a biographical interview and a photo elicitation interview. Jessie and I met at a restaurant in Athens, Georgia one evening in early January 2004 for an in-depth biographical interview (Erben, 1998). In an interview conducted in the same manner as the one discussed above, Jessie spoke for almost 2 hours in response to the question, “Tell me your life story.” I audio-taped this interview and sent Jessie a copy of the transcription in order that she could make changes to the transcript. We agreed to discuss any changes following the photo elicitation interview. Although when the time came, she had no changes to request, the offer was especially important to Jessie as she was concerned with her standing in the professional community.

Photo elicitation was conducted in the same manner as noted above. After the biographical interview, I gave Jessie a disposable camera and a postage paid envelope, asking her to take photographs of “What does transsexuality mean to me?” We met in Madison,

Georgia in April, 2004 for the photo elicitation interview. The only notable difference between the discussion above and this experience was Jessie took approximately 7 minutes to sort and arrange the photographs she took into the order she wanted to talk about them. After Jessie spoke about the photographs for approximately 45 minutes, we discussed several questions I had from her biographical interview.

Member checks were conducted throughout the analysis and interpretation of the data for this study. I e-mailed Michelle and Jessie when I did not clearly understand a segment of their data. This was done to facilitate my understanding of the participants' narratives and to diminish the differential implicit in etic research. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources.

The data gathered above was unwieldy –92 pages of interview data and 68 photographs. In order to create data sets of a size that could be analyzed in depth, I created abridged narratives from the interviews. These narratives were constructed using predominately the narrator's own words -- altering the text only for clarity and brevity -- Bal's (1999) concept of an event, and Moustakas's (1994) concept of data reduction. According to Bal, an event is "the transition from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors" (p. 182, 1999). The criteria for selecting events are the following: 1. Does it communicate change? 2. Does it determine future events? 3. Does it have two actors and a predicate – an actor that acts on another actor? I found, however, that in following this formula exactly, I lost much important information. For example, the fact that Michelle's father was a co-pastor of the church was not an event, but in relation to the other events of the fabula it was an important piece of information in setting the context of Michelle's life. Thus, I found myself basically using Bal's suggestion, but also using my own intuition and keeping lines of the story that I felt were

necessary to the meaning of the narrative. I combined the idea of using only events with Moustakas's (1994) suggestion of data reduction, using everything that is narrated, but only include it once. Thus, I only repeated an event once, regardless of the number of times it was narrated. I used this method for constructing narratives with all verbal and written data in this study.

An example of this method can be seen below. A verbatim segment of the interview is presented. The italicized words in this text are those that I kept. The words "knew" and "saw" are underlined as they both communicate approximately the same idea. Thus in attempting to repeat ideas only once, I kept only "saw," a subjective choice, in the condensed story. It can also be noticed that I added the word "said" in the condensed narrative for clarity.

But, I am sitting at work *one day* and *this beautiful blonde girl*, she is like my big sister now, I haven't talked to her lately. But, she is getting her checked cashed and I finish her transaction and she looks at me and just like "*Do you want to be a girl?*" And *it was just like the angels sang and the lights flashed* and *she was trans herself*, I had no clue; she was completely 100% passable. And *she just knew it, in my eyes and saw my soul* and just knew that, that is what I wanted. And so, I got off of work. We met and had coffee. And she gave me the name of her doctor. *I went to her doctor three days later.*

The condensed version reads as follows:

One day at work this beautiful blond girl said, "Do you want to be a girl?" It was just like the angels sang and the lights flashed. She was trans herself. I had no clue. She saw it in my eyes and my soul. I went to her doctor three days later.

After the narratives had been condensed, I then separated each narrative into scenes. I did this in order to analyze how and if the narratives aligned with Roof's (1999) heteronarrative structure, which will be discussed below. With the biographical interview data, I separated the narrative into a different scene when the main theme that connected a series of fabula changed. For example, reading the exposure of Michelle's homosexuality, her dismissal from school, and her subsequent treatment at home as being linked by the theme of being banished from home, I separated these events from the surrounding text, labeling them as one scene. This approach became problematic when the theme changed after an embedded fabula. The question then arose, to which scene does the embedded fabula belong. When this situation came up, I read and re-read the data and attempted to attach the embedded story to the scene to which it most closely aligned.

The process of constructing scenes with the photo elicited texts was quite simple. Before the photo elicitation interview, I asked each participant to sort the photographs in the order they wish to talk about them. I then took the photograph she discussed first and the condensed fabula that described it and assigned this the position of the introduction. I placed as the conclusion the photograph she discussed last and its description. In the order that they were mentioned, the remainder of the photographs and their accompanying narrative stood as the middle scenes.

In the case of Michelle's Yahoo profile, I followed primarily the same logic. I allowed the opening page of the site to be the first scene and each dated folder to constitute the following scenes. The opening page then became the introduction, the 2004 folder the conclusion, and the 1999-2003 folders became the middle scenes of the narrative. And finally,

with Jessie's journal, I allowed her first entry to stand as the introduction, her last entry to represent the conclusion, and the remaining entries to constitute the middles.

All data was considered of equal status as it was examined using Bal's (1999) theory of narratology and Roof's (1996) theory of the heteronarrative. Using Bal's basic theories, as will be discussed below, I analyzed the structure of the narratives constructed from this data. Roof (1996) suggests that our narratives in the West follow a specific structure which always concludes in the heteronormative, the normative of the modern individual – the alignment of sex/gender/sexual orientation, the logic of capitalism, knowledge, identity, and family (Roof, 1996). By concluding in the heteronormative, this structure disallows the re/production of homologic bodies and subjects, bodies and subjects constituted outside the logic of the heteronormative, ambiguous and/or perverse bodies and subjects.

The structure of this narrative, which Roof (1996) called heteronarrative, begins in the heteronormative. The introduction foreshadows the events to come. This foreshadowing tells of homologic middles to follow as well as the heteronormative conclusion. Homology is allowed and in fact mandated in the middle of the narrative in order to create the tension needed for a series of events to constitute a story. Homology provides pleasure as we can safely enjoy its perversity since we already know it will conclude in the heteronormative. We know this not only because of the foreshadowing in the introduction, but because we have read the structure so many time before. After the homology of the middle, the conclusion ends in the heteronormative through pulling any of the remaining homologic events and characters back into the heterologic through the logic of the heteronormative. Thus, the introduction begins in the heteronormative and foreshadows the events to come. The middle is homologic, and the conclusion ends in the heteronormative.

This narrative structure is inseparable from the selves we narrate; there is no body and subject to narrate that is not already a narration (Butler, 1999; Roof, 1996). The structure of narrative and the body and subject positions available are two sides of the same dynamic which function to re/produce body and subject positions. Therefore, Roof's theory of heteronarrative provides a structure by which to analyze how narrative re/produces the transsexual body and subject within the heteronormative.

Although Roof (1996) provided me with the structure by which to analyze these narratives, she did not give me the methods I required to carry out the task. So, I turned to Bal's (1999) methods of narrative analysis. Bal presents a structural analysis of texts. She suggests that texts can be analyzed on the level of the fabula, the story, "a fabula that is presented in a certain manner" (p. 5) and the text –the medium, "such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or combination thereof" in which a story is told (p. 5). She thus offered me a theory that would encompass my entire data set.

On the level of the text, she gave me the tools to examine narration, argumentative elements, descriptive elements, metaphors, and embedded texts (Bal, 1999). Stories are narrated by an external narrator (EN) and/or a character bound narrator (CN). The first is a narrator that is not an actor in the fabula, and the latter is a character in the narrative. The difference in the level of narration between an (EN) and a (CN), "entails a difference in the narrative rhetoric of truth" (Bal, 1999, p. 22). Our interpretation of what we read as 'truth' is very much influenced on the position of the narrator. If the fabula is narrated by a CN, this narrator usually proclaims that she is voicing the 'truth' about herself. But the "I" of the narrator may or may not be an actor in the fabula and may or may not be the focalizer, the perspective or point of view. The distinctions between the levels of narration, allow a "finer

picture” of narrative event (Bal, 1999, p. 29). Additionally, separating the narrative from the non-narrative comments of a fabula allowed me “to measure the difference between the text’s overt ideology, as stated in such comments, and its more hidden or naturalized ideology, as embodied in the narrative representations” (Bal, 1999, p. 31).

Bal (1999) also gave me tools to examine the argumentative, descriptive, and metaphorical elements of the texts. Argumentative passages are portions in the text that refer to elements outside the fabula (Bal, 1999). In referring to elements outside itself, a narrative often exposes its ideological underpinnings. As these underpinnings may be contradicted in the descriptive or narrative portions of the text, argumentative references cannot be examined in isolation, but should be explored in the context of the whole. Description also has a great impact on the ideological effect of a text (Bal, 1999). As a “textual fragment in which features are attributed to objects,” description is a “privileged site of focalization” (Bal, 1999, p. 36). Metaphors often cover ideological meaning in a text. Taken as natural, they often stand in for narratives behind the text. Therefore, through the examination of metaphors, I was able to gain “insight not into what the speaker ‘means’, but into what a cultural community considers acceptable interpretations” (Bal, 1999, p. 35).

And lastly, on the level of the text, I explored the relation between the embedded narratives and the primary fabula. Embedded narratives are stories within the primary fabula. There are three different types of embedded narratives: those that explain the primary fabula, those that resemble the primary fabula, and non-narrative. Those embedded texts that explain may reify ideology by merely serving an explanatory function, or they may lead to change through explaining an alternate outcome to the primary fabula. And finally, non-narrative embedded texts, may effect the reading of a story through explicit commentary.

On the level of the story, ideology is most often inscribed through the ordering of events, the rhythm, the characters, and focalization (Bal, 1999). The ordering of the events in a story is a technique that draws attention to certain things. An event is a process, a “transition from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors” which contains an element of change, choice and confrontation (Bal, 1999, p.182). Events in a fabula are linked in some type of logical, usually chronological, order. Chronological deviations, especially in the form of retroversions, references to events that have occurred in the past, are not unfamiliar. Anticipations, references to events that have not yet taken place, also occur, albeit less frequently. Referring to the future, anticipations are usually covert allusions to the outcome of the fabula, “an outcome which one must know, in order to recognize (in retrospect) the anticipations for what they are...[--a suggested] sense of fatalism or predestination: Nothing can be done, we can only watch the progression toward the final result” (Bal, 1999, p. 95). I thus explored chronological deviations, for their ideological implications and their possible function as a foreshadowing of the conclusion that erases the homologic narrative middle (Roof, 1996).

I also examined the rhythm of the story. The general rhythm of a narrative may be determined by surveying how much story time is given to events in the fabula. The relation between the two, ranging from zero to infinity, may indicate the importance of an event through an abundance of pages in relation to the fabula, or it may indicate boredom, an on-going, slow moving elaboration. The ellipsing of an event, its absence in the story, may also indicate importance. An ellipsed event may signify that it was too painful to speak, or it may mark an event’s erasure. A collapsing of this relation between the fabula and the story, on the other hand, gives the text a postmodern “feel” (Bal, 1999, p. 110).

Every time an event is presented in a story, it is presented from a certain perspective. This perspective influences the meaning of the text. Thus, I analyzed the focalization, the relation between the one who sees and the object seen (Bal, 1999). Focalization can shift through out a story, moving from a character in the story (CF) to an external agent (EF). The following questions are important in analyzing focalization: 1) What object is focalized? 2) Who focalizes? 3) What is the attitude of the focalizer? and 4) Who can perceive the focalized object? This latter question is important, as being privy to a focalized object gives an agent power.

On the level of the fabula, I looked at the relation between events and how they fit into the narrative cycle and the relation between actors. Examining the relation between events and comparing them to other narrative structures illustrates how the story aligns with the traditional narrative structure (Bal, 1999). It also makes apparent whether the teleological process of the story follows the pattern of improvement or deterioration. The positive or negative trajectory of this pattern may illustrate the ideology of the position that the character holds, since what is improvement and what is deterioration is culturally defined.

Along with using Bal's method to examine the heteronarrative structure of the narratives I constructed from the data sets, I also used narratology to analyze the constituents of the body and subject. These tools allowed me to investigate the other side of the narrative dynamic, the "type" of body and subject narrated, which functions to re/produce the transsexual body and subject.

In the following two chapters, I discuss my findings, which I have constructed from a narrative analysis of the data sets of two male-to-female transsexuals in Georgia. Michelle's narratives are presented in chapter 4, and Jessie's narratives are discussed in chapter 5. This is

followed by an exploration into a homologic representation of a transsexual body and subject.

A concluding chapter follows.