

# Corporeal Gender: Feeling Gender in First Person Trans\* Narratives

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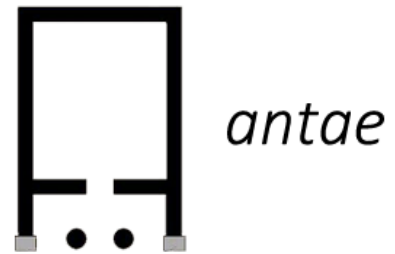
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## Corporeal Gender: Feeling Gender in First Person Trans\* Narratives

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Feeling is a markedly different concept from “being” or “doing”, particularly in relation to gender. Feeling is dynamic and changeable, unlike the static idea of “being” male or female. Feeling also problematises physicality and agency to a greater extent than the performative concept of “doing” gender; how much agency can one truly have over feelings? Yet the word “feeling” is tricky. Does it mean the sense of touch through which we understand the physical world? Or the emotional sense through which we understand the intangible world? These two types of feeling are not so far removed as we may think; in the field of gender studies, the connection between physical being and identity is a point of passionate debate. This debate is most starkly clear in the interaction of trans\* autobiographical literature with wider discourse; when the body before the mirror does not connect with your inner sense of self, your investment in the connection of physicality and identity is deep. In this exploration of three trans\* autobiographers, we will see how the authors each have a unique conceptualisation of their gender, yet are simultaneously all engaged in the process of feeling gender, both corporeally and emotionally. The texts I will engage with are *Emergence*, by Mario Martino, *Gender Outlaw*, by Kate Bornstein, and the blog ‘Nuclear Unicorn’, by Katherine Cross.

However, prior to delving into the texts themselves, there are some definitions to be clarified. In this paper, the moniker ‘trans\*’ will be used as an umbrella term for the gender categories of the authors discussed. The asterisk at the end of trans\* is important: it signifies that the word covers both transsexual and transgendered individuals, as well as many other identity categories that defy such simple naming conventions. Indeed, the precise definitions of the term ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexual’ are flexible, and hotly debated from all angles. The very choice of one term or definition over another can signal a political statement, as well as a statement about the self and body. The use of the umbrella word trans\* allows an analytical dissection of authors’ own uses and definitions of their gendered identities, without generating confusion; we are able to discuss the specificity of someone who identifies as transgender or transsexual, but acknowledge that all fall within the scope of trans\* writing. Yet the concept of trans\* as a singular identity is relatively new: in previous years, there were men and women, and men who wanted to be women and women who wanted to be men. More succinctly, trans\* individuals were known as male-to-female or female-to-male, and explicitly identified as either male or female. As Kate Bornstein notes, for a very long time trans\* people have been denied

their own 'right to think of ourselves as transsexual'.<sup>1</sup> With increasing societal tolerance for ambiguity in the realm of gender and sex, we have needed to expand both our minds and vocabulary. First person trans\* writing has been instrumental to this very welcome expansion.

Working through these texts chronologically, we will see a development in the treatment and understanding of the body, as the social and theoretical context surrounding each author changes. That ambiguous mix of physicality and emotion is the vehicle through which gender is filtered, decoded, and articulated. When there seems to be no vehicle for communication of feeling, new languages are created. This new language of gender-feeling, and its relationship to the physical body, is both worthy of our respect and demanding of further attention.

Beginning with Mario Martino, we see an almost essentialist understanding of gender and the body. This essentialism is most clearly seen in the chapters surrounding his sexual reassignment surgery. However, it is not an essentialism grounded in the body-as-is. Rather, it is an essentialism grounded in the body-as-desired. Martino explicitly states that he feels that the true core of his identity is male, and is determined to modify his outer physical appearance to align with his essential core. He firmly believed that he 'should have been born with male anatomy', and decided that he would not let his destiny be ruled by 'biological patterns'.<sup>2</sup>

Martino disassociates himself from his female body early on; he never felt like a girl, and did not connect with this physical reality. At the onset of puberty, he was excited to experiment with an 'improvised penis' that he constructed from the nozzle part of an enema bag. The excitement and elation he felt at this is quickly dashed when he is forced to buy a bra, and is reminded of the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between his physical appearance and his inner understanding of self. Martino wonders how he could ever reconcile his selfhood with 'this new image thrust upon me by virtue of a female form'. His identification with the male physical body is markedly different; any indication that he appears or is perceived as male is a triumph. From the first time he experiments with placing the douche 'nozzle [...] between the lips by the clitoris', his quest for working male genitalia is irrepressible.<sup>3</sup> And yet this construction is ultimately inadequate; in later life, when he begins to use a dildo in his sexual relationships, it feels a 'demeaning [...] compromise'. He would not be happy until he had matched his 'body to [his] gender'.<sup>4</sup> The physical body became the mode of expression through which Martino articulated his understanding of his maleness.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Martino, *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers Inc., 1977), p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 24-25, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Martino, *Emergence*, p.114.

Martino discusses the reconciliation of his physical body with the self that he believes and wishes to be in vivid detail. The possibility of surgery is referred to as a chance to emerge from ‘this labyrinth of erroneous human anatomy’.<sup>5</sup> He is convinced that once his body reflects the person he feels to be inside, he will by default be able to correct the misconceptions and misunderstandings held by other people. Indeed, when he finally reaches his elusive goal, he is immeasurably happy with the results, and content with his life: ‘I am no longer a man searching for myself’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the physical state of his body is an integral part of his identity, his gender, and ultimately, his happiness. The connection he feels to his constructed male body is far deeper and far more profound than with the female physicality with which he had felt burdened.

This is markedly different from the typically Butlerian concept of performative gender. For Butler, gender is about the doing, and so corporeality does not enter into the question as anything other than the canvas for that gender action. For Martino, gender is a doing that actively represents an inner feeling deeply connected to corporeal reality. The difference is subtle, but important. Where Butler’s performativity ‘contests the very notion of the subject’, Martino’s understanding of gender relies upon a conscious subject that attempts to actively interpret and articulate a self that is understood through the emotive response to physical being, and inner sense of self.<sup>7</sup> Whilst ‘Butler repeatedly refutes the idea of a pre-linguistic inner core or essence’, Martino relies upon an inner core that dictates and interprets his “doing” of gender.<sup>8</sup> Whilst both Butler and Martino are invested in the agency of the individual in their identity construction, Butler suggests that the agency is limitless, whilst Martino infers that one can only take action to better portray the inner truth that cannot be changed. Whilst for Butler the body is the effect of discourse, for Martino, discourse is the effect of the body. In particular, the discourse of gender-feeling is the effect of the body, and the body’s physicality is the language of this discourse.

For Kate Bornstein, gender-feeling is equally articulated through and mediated by the physical body. However, Bornstein does not limit herself to the two traditionally expressed genders. Rather, particularly in her 1992 text *Gender Outlaw*, Bornstein exalts the idea of multiplicity of gender, and the innumerable permutations of these expressions. In a chapter titled ‘Naming All the Parts’, Bornstein conducts an exercise essential to any text discussing the subjects of gender or sexuality: defining the system of reference by which the author will engage with and explore that subject. For Bornstein, neither gender nor its expression are concrete concepts; they are fluid and dynamic, continually shifting depending on where we find ourselves within the social matrix. She notes that ‘you don’t

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<sup>5</sup> Martino, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>7</sup> Sara Salih, ‘On Judith Butler and Performativity’, in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 45(3), October 2003, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

get where you're going when you just stand underneath some sign, waiting for it to tell you what to do'.<sup>9</sup>

For Bornstein, it is not enough to be identified with a single, stable sign of gender. Rather, it is just another facet of identity to be continually assumed, modified, or rejected depending on the situation at hand. Indeed, there is no end point to the process of gender-discovery. Gender, for Bornstein, is a decision for every individual based on the connections currently felt with wider definitions and understandings of gender. She defines gender fluidity as 'the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change'.<sup>10</sup> In opposition to Martino, Bornstein derides the idea of single specificity of gender, and proceeds to analyse the different cues that identify people as ostensibly singularly male or female. Be they textual, physical, or behavioral cues, Bornstein asks the reader why this particular behavior is arbitrarily assigned to that particular gender. She also observes that most people are dissatisfied with one aspect or another of their assigned gender class, and the status and behaviors expected to fall in with that class. The implicit question to the reader is: why suffer this gender dissatisfaction? Do not be complicit in your own unhappiness, she implores, play with gender identity and cues as you desire.

Yet this postmodern conceptualisation of gender fluidity does not negate the importance of connection to the body and physicality. Bornstein is explicit that she never hated her body as a man. Rather, she hated the fact that 'it made [her] a man in the eyes of others'.<sup>11</sup> This is a departure from both Martino's described experience as well as the predominant myth of the universal trans\* narrative. It was not discomfort with her actual, physical body that drove her identification as a trans\* person, but the interpretation of that body that wider society imposed upon her. For Bornstein, the 'trapped in the wrong body' trope is 'an unfortunate metaphor' that limits the possibility of expression for all trans\* people.<sup>12</sup> Exacerbating this limitation is the medicalisation of transsexuality: a term 'invented by doctors' in a system 'perpetuated by doctors'.<sup>13</sup> Trans\* people are obliged to conform to medicalised expectations of their relationships with their bodies in order to remain aligned with the rest of society. Thus, wider society is dictating to trans\* people how they should and shouldn't feel about their bodies; the acceptable narrative is of feeling trapped in the wrong body.

To combat the social imposition of feeling bodily discomfort, Bornstein turns to other mythic tropes: the fool and the shaman. These two cultural positions remain within society, whilst operating beyond social boundaries; the shaman and the fool are

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<sup>9</sup> Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

representative of the third space, into which Bornstein suggests trans\* people must move. This third space is created in two ways respectively; the fool creates it by inducing laughter, the shaman through transcendence. Bornstein suggests trans\* people appropriate these tools to widen influence, and demand recognition. It is in her consideration of transcendence and rebirth that Bornstein reveals her link between the body, spirituality, and identity. She states that ‘gender enlightenment begins with death’, and then describes her personal pre-operative ritual of running a decorative axe across her wrist and breastbone, to symbolize the death of the part of her that felt male.<sup>14</sup> In Shamanic tradition, in the instant-eternity between death and re-birth, the spirits ‘give the shaman a portion of the truth to take back to this world’.<sup>15</sup> Bornstein relates that she found truth in her body-as-female upon waking in the hospital. Yet in order to obtain this truth, there must be a physical death and re-birth.

Noting that every seven years, ‘every cell in our body dies, and is replaced by a new cell’, Bornstein paints human life as a continual process of death and rebirth, and each rebirth is a physical rediscovery of ourselves; thus, we come to the kernel of Bornstein’s gender-feeling: ‘This body is homegrown’.<sup>16</sup> Seven years after her reassignment surgery, she states that ‘every one of these cells became girl’.<sup>17</sup> But seven years further down the line, where will that body be? The gender-feeling process will have undoubtedly progressed; ‘by the time the next seven years have come and gone/Nothing of this body is gonna be around.’ The body is the articulation of current gender-feeling. As time progresses, both of these identifiers are open to change and rebirth. In seven years, Bornstein states, ‘my girl skin will be lying behind me in the desert/Right next to my lesbian skin/Right next to my man skin/Right next to my boy skin.’<sup>18</sup>

Katherine Cross’s personal framework and understanding of gender could be seen as an interesting synthesis of Martino’s and Bornstein’s respective positions. Whilst Cross is in no doubt of her own identification as ‘woman’, she does not subscribe to the essentialist and somewhat binary-driven ideas of Martino. Equally, whilst Cross states that ‘we are the masters of our own stories as human beings’, she does not explode gender into as many multifaceted fractals as Bornstein.<sup>19</sup> Yet Cross is the author who engages most directly with the notion of feeling. The moment that she retrospectively pinpoints as the dawning of her knowledge of her womanhood is when she felt threatened by a male classmate’s assertion that ‘women who dressed a “certain way” should take responsibility for their rapes’. It is this feeling of sisterhood and ‘kinship’ with other women that set

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<sup>14</sup> Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 227-228.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine Cross, ‘The Daughter Also Rises’, *Nuclear Unicorn* (January 27 2010) <[www.quinnae.com](http://www.quinnae.com)> [accessed 5 September 2013].

Cross down the road of gender discovery. As she states herself, her gender identity had 'nothing to do with the fact that I was desirous of Barbie dolls or pretty dresses. It had everything to do with how I was feeling'. This is a statement regularly repeated throughout Cross's online writing; again and again, she reiterates how 'a lot of this is based on feeling'. Where Cross references feeling, she is specifically referring to emotional feeling. However, these emotional feelings are not divorced from physical feeling. Another key turning point in Cross's gender journey was when she felt physically repulsed by a preacher joking about a woman's rape, as the woman in question had been wearing what was considered inappropriate clothing. This repulsion manifested itself physically, as she 'launched' herself out of her chair to object to this attitude. Cross 'felt empathy and kinship' with this woman she had never met, and this kinship contributed towards her consolidated identity as a woman, and as a feminist. Thus, Cross truly felt her gender on a deeply emotional level before she was ever able to clearly articulate what that feeling could mean. The first way Cross was able to truly act on and explore this feeling was through the world of online gaming.<sup>20</sup>

The social phenomenon of online gaming is fascinating in this particular context for two key reasons. Firstly, it allows the gamer to build an avatar entirely of their choosing, with whatever characteristics and gender traits they so desire. Secondly, it creates a new interface through which the gamer can explore their body. Whilst the new interface may be virtual, the self-exploration and discovery within these games have very real outcomes. Online communities and social interactions reflect exactly those that we experience in our "real" offline lives; to enter a world in a new body, albeit virtual, is to experience society from a wholly different physical standpoint. For Katherine Cross, at least, the physical self she was able to become in virtual forms felt far more real than the self she found herself inhabiting in the supposedly real world. Rather than pure escapism, there was a somewhat isomorphic relationship between the online and offline body. In the creation and alteration of her avatar, Cross was able to explore her relationship to her material body. Through this, she began to revisit past feelings, and past gender understandings. She considers the fact that she would often 'look in mirrors with [her] penis tucked between [her] legs' as a child, but never thought of this as anything but normal.<sup>21</sup> The possibilities of avatar design gave her opportunity to consider herself in ways previously incomprehensible. This gave her confidence; she states that 'despite still being unmotivated and depressed in the real world, when I played these games I felt a sense of overweening confidence [...] for the first time in my life'.<sup>22</sup> Through her World of Warcraft avatar, Cross was able to become 'a confident, intelligent, and mature woman

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<sup>20</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Cross, 'The Daughter Also Rises'.

<sup>21</sup> Cross, 'The Daughter Also Rises'.

<sup>22</sup> Cross, 'The Daughter Also Rises, Episode II and III'.

who could command the respect of others and hold her own'. Cross, consequently, was able to explore further why being seen and understood as a woman 'felt so right'.<sup>23</sup>

Cross had felt her gender emotively, and was then given the opportunity to express that feeling through her online avatar. It is this manifestation of that feeling that articulated clearly, both to herself and to those around her, that she was a woman. This represents a new understanding of what constitutes the body; as the online self becomes an extension of the offline self, so the relationship with the avatar has a mutually influential relationship with the offline physical body. Through the vehicle of the online body, Cross came to better understand her physical body beyond the net, and reinterpreted her gender through this lens. Thus, as with both Martino and Bornstein, the body becomes the mode of articulation for gender-feeling.

All three of these authors approach their relationship with gender from different angles. With such a personal subject, it is unsurprising that there is such variation in each individual understanding of the concept. Yet all these individual interpretations are reached through the process of feeling. Mario Martino articulates clearly and repeatedly in his autobiography that from a very early age, he 'felt like' a boy.<sup>24</sup> This feeling of boy-ness was not modified by the fact that he was born with a female body. Conversely, Kate Bornstein states that she has inhabited and identified with a multitude of genders, taking on whichever she feels like at any given time. Katherine Cross takes pains to highlight that she 'never felt trapped' by her body or sex, and yet gradually became aware that she did not feel like a man. Rather, she felt deep kinship with women, and eventually realised she identified as a woman herself. Each of these distinct approaches to understanding gender are articulated with reference to the physical, material body, and how that body fits within the individual's theoretical framework of gender. Each of these approaches is, ultimately, a different way to feel gender.

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<sup>23</sup> Cross, 'The Daughter Also Rises, Episode II and III'.

<sup>24</sup> Martino, p. xi.