

## TARHEELS AND TRANSFAGS

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*“Rather than hurting my chances of passing, however, my newfound confidence in gender performance as a femme, along with the remarkable physical changes of the ‘T,’ allowed me to pass as male 100% of the time. The major difference now, though, was that when I dropped the macho routine, most people just thought I was a fag. Before, if my routine ever ‘slipped,’ I immediately stopped passing and people thought I was a dyke.”*

“You are a butch woman, you dyke.”

“How dare you co-opt our male only space?”

“You came up in my search for females, you fag.”

The first line is from when I attempted to join a trannyfags blog community. There was tremendous response to my post about being shunned from a transfags group because I do not identify as a male, but as simply, FTM (female-to-male transgender). I was told by a group of individuals that I deserved to be excluded, and in this crude manner, told I am not a “real” transman, but instead, a woman pretending to be one. They agreed with the transfags group that told me I was trying to enter a space in which I didn’t belong.

The last line came from a confused boy looking for girls online. I list myself as female if it is absolutely necessary to be listed at all, not because I am female-identified, necessarily, but because I’m not male-identified. I look like a male with my clothes on, but in one particular way, I’m still more like a female. And I’m alright with that.

I have been on testosterone now for 6 years – or, as it’s more commonly referred to as, “T.” I “pass” as male full-time, without question or doubt. And yet, because I don’t self-identify as a male, I, by my mere existence, threaten many transmen. My refusal to identify as male scares many transmen I’ve met so much that they are pushed to going out of their way to take me down. My identity, they feel, somehow undermines their safety. You see, I look just like other physically transitioned (those who have undergone medical transition) transmen. While my experience has been similar to their own, I am not like the “stealth” transmen who are not out as trans but living full-time as male and don’t disclose the trans identity. If it can be true that I, differently self-identified, can transition the same way, then maybe male-identified, closeted transmen can be like me, but who I am is not a person those in the closet for any reason can allow themselves to be.

It isn’t as if I fuck with gender on so much of a presentation level that they can separate from me. I don’t wear dresses or makeup – or even glitter. I wear men’s clothes and I wear them the way most men wear them. I don’t bind my chest, my breasts are small enough to make that unnecessary. Without much effort, I pass exceedingly well, 100 percent of the time. The effect of the “T” is all that society needed for me to be read as male.

To many, I am a big scary monster. I look like them, but underneath lies the spawn of the devil, someone who reads as male because of hormones but doesn’t identify as a male and, therefore, in the mentality of this group of people and its highly pressure-driven definitions, cannot actually be a transman. Simply put (and it is very clear to them), transman equals male. What seems to baffle and miff them is the idea that in a broader sense, transman can include masculinity that is not necessarily male. Okay, now, hold on right here. Am I crazy, or isn’t that what FTM transgender is? An FTM can be a man who is not male. Doesn’t that make sense? Well, those who believe that I am not a transman because I am not male-identified also believe I am not trans at all, but am actually a butch woman who has arrived to steal away the experience of transmen, invade their trans-only space, and co-opt their language. To call myself trans irritates them because they feel

I've taken a word that I don't rightfully own.

Without fail, the accusation is of actually being a butch, which is something I have never been – even when I did identify as a queer woman. On the contrary, I identify as femme, but that would just blow their minds if I even mentioned it! In some people's minds, identifying as femme would just make me even *more* of a woman, or at least, less of a man. Traditionally feminine characteristics, be they performed outwardly or in my case, lived in my emotional experience, particularly as a partner (boyfriend,) are highly looked down upon by much of the trans-masculine community. I've known quite a few who have attempted to remove themselves from anything remotely related to women, even in the most distant way, just in case whatever remained might "give them away." I've heard comments that relate to things like "if I were a girl, but I'm not so what do I know?" or "I don't wear dresses, I'm not a cross-dresser." These may be valid points, but they devalue the history of living as a woman and having at least some, if strained, understanding of that social experience. Personally, I'm no use matching eyeliner to stockings, but the fact is I never was good at that. That doesn't mean that I was never a woman. But this is my experience. Some transmen believe they were always men. I, unlike those who identify that way, was actually a woman for a little while. I was awkward and uncomfortable, and preferred to be a man the whole while, but a woman I was.

One of the transmen with this mentality of male-identified-only transsexualism told the genderqueer/trans group I belong to that he would like to educate me because apparently he knows how it all works. Having written, spoken, performed, filmed, photographed and – oh yeah – *lived* as trans obviously does not qualify me as knowledgeable on the subject. He harassed me and humiliated me to the transmen listserv he moderates. That group, of course, all agreed with him. In their world, transmen get top surgery (removal of breasts to create a visibly male chest) and the idea that someone would not bind their chest before surgery, or even not get top surgery at all, is not only unfathomable, but angering as well. Men don't have breasts! Well, *this* man does (kind of!)

Of the many, probably about 100 members, of that listserv, I had only one supporter, which unfortunately didn't do much good. These guys don't want to diversify their thought. They still believe in only men and only women and there is exactly one way to be either. I finally had the opportunity to meet this individual, the listserv moderator, in person about a year after the entire ordeal. When he saw me, and saw how well I pass, how presentationally masculine I am, and heard my baritone voice, he apologized to me. I accepted, but only after the fact do I feel that it was because of my outward appearance. I have a feeling he feels the same way he did about my identity, but accepts me now as a transman because he knows I look like one. Or maybe he does get it, but that doesn't mean his group of followers do. There are many that remain who will not accept that a man doesn't have to be a male.

Okay, enough bitching!

When I was first coming out in 2000, I quickly accumulated a large network of FTM (female to male transgender) friends and became close with many of them. I thought that a whole new world of friends was opening up for me. Everything was suddenly simple, whereas before it had seemed so complex. We were boys, and that was all. Nothing complicated there. Finally, I had found a community that made sense. I could finally be happy and have friends and a community who truly understood me and my experiences.

But, like many identity-based communities, my newfound home came with its own set of rules and regulations. These constrictions mostly related to hair, clothes, posture, vocal inflection, and general behavior (particularly in relation to interaction with people whose genders match their assigned sexes). I was suddenly expected to wear big baggy pants (preferably cargo) to hide my hips, big square polo shirts to give me a rectangular torso shape and hide my chest, cut my hair short but add just a bit of gel, stand slouched, shoulders curved to further hide my chest, hands in pockets, to emphasize the squared off posture, and drop the ends of sentences instead of doing what women and gay men do, raise them.

When I look at pictures and videos of me and my friends from that time, I'm shocked to discover that we were clones. Literally, we wore the same shirt in different colors and we all had the exact same hair cut. At the time, I found comfort in our similarity. I felt like it was okay to be this way because others were now like me (or, perhaps, I was like others,) and, certainly, I wanted to remain included.

All these things – the clothes, the hair, and the voice – helped me to start passing when before I even started taking “T.” I wanted to pass as a man and I also wanted to take testosterone, but years later, when I was on “T,” and I was able to pass, I became much more comfortable in my femme identity. I didn't worry about doing all those “masculine” things – like speaking in a monotone voice and standing, shoulders hunched, with my hands in my pockets – because nobody questioned my masculinity anymore. Rather than hurting my chances of passing, however, my newfound confidence in gender performance as a femme, along with the remarkable physical changes of the “T,” allowed me to pass as male 100% of the time. The major difference now, though, was that when I dropped the macho routine, most people just thought I was a fag. Before, if my routine ever “slipped,” I immediately stopped passing and people thought I was a dyke.

Initially, I did feel that I had to exaggerate some things to get my point across. However, after the most significant part of the physical transition was over, I was able to relax. Many transmen I know, though, never relax, and they never let themselves take a break from the macho routine. While it may come natural to some, I know that for others it is a conscious choice – a choice often made to survive. To many of these people, my decision to let go and embrace a femme identity is threatening. Unlike hyper-masculine transmen, I can survive as femme. But, because it is scary, it angers many of them. They become disgusted and are publicly rude to me.

I'm not exactly a raging queen or anything. I don't prance around tossing glitter out of a basket (I do, however, cry during “chick flicks” and dramatic musicals!) My version of femme is not that I'm feminine. I'm quite masculine, really. I'm just a different kind of man; a more sensitive, quieter,

and better dressed kind of man than what is expected and accepted by this culture. But I'm very comfortable being out as trans and I don't hide the fact that I don't bind. This concept can get sticky, though. I am too out for the stealth transmen, but I'm not out enough for the genderqueers. My comfort level lies somewhere in between – I like passing, but I also like remaining visibly queer. I would like to be read as a transman most of the time, but there are exceptions, like in bathrooms, gas stations, or on busses – or, for that matter, anytime when strangers are within earshot. In most places, after all, a visible transsexual is more likely to disgust someone than to get a nod of approval from them.

Also, it's not always appropriate to discuss body parts (which is the first thing many non-trans people think of when they hear the word “transsexual”) in the general public. Saying very loudly “I'm a transsexual” in the wide open isn't exactly socially acceptable. It is also potentially dangerous. At the very least, it is asking for odd stares.

At the same time, if I were to exclaim this, my body would become immediately cross-examined. “Ah yeah! Small hands! There's the proof.” Or “I can see your boobs today.” (Both of these are comments that have actually been made to me, amongst other similar statements). Where they didn't notice before, now there may be obvious “clues” and “giveaways” as if they were little Where's Waldos. While I don't mind it being known that I'm trans (in fact I prefer that,) it would certainly make me uncomfortable if someone were to, upon learning that I am female, stare at my chest, searching for breasts or looking at my pants for a bulge (which is actually there because I pack with a prosthetic). The biggest confusion for many on-lookers is my developed Adam's apple. I have one, and this is, for many, my proof of maleness.

It's one thing to be checked out by an admirer and another thing to be ogled as a freak. Many people don't mind being stared at, the whole “subvert the dominant paradigm” thing. I consider myself far from the heteronormative culture, but it's a conundrum really. I don't want to be invisible, but I do want to pass. I guess that there's a line between visibility,

on the one hand, and sticking out like a sore thumb, on the other. I just want to be treated with respect and dignity – I want to be treated like a human; an adult not a child; responsible not immature; a person not a sinner. The “sore-thumb-sticker-outters” are often blatantly discriminated against and harassed. While I admire their bravery, I don’t have the energy for dealing with constant harassment -- especially when I get so much of it from my fellow transmen. This doesn’t make me weak, as some quite visibly queer folks I’ve encountered have scoffed.

It’s not just transmen, however, that have been hostile to my identity. Even some people I’ve met in the radical punk community have reacted negatively to my medical transition and inevitable “passability.” Interestingly, I often get the same response from lesbians – butches in particular. Some have accused me of selling out for white male privilege because, I pass 100% of the time and I’m no longer harassed for sticking out. I don’t look “different” anymore. Some people think that it takes “sticking out” to be a trans activist. Personally, I think I’m pretty damned radical – whether or not I pass. I’ve lived two genders, and one in between, and I talk about it freely and honestly. That’s pretty radical, if you ask me.

Curiously, my father and male friends (both gay and straight) have been similarly opposed to transition – but for the completely opposite reason. Instead of accusing me of trying to fly under the radar by passing, they believed that I was transitioning because I was *seeking out* attention. I thought that this was utterly ridiculous; I wasn’t sporting gauged body jewelry or a 3-foot pink mohawk. There really wasn’t anything visually spectacular about me – well, except for my rakish good looks, of course! Besides that, however, I looked pretty “normal.” I looked like a regular boy. Contrary to what my father believed, I was someone who, rather suddenly, *didn’t* draw much attention to himself at all.

As if my world wasn’t small and lonely enough, some of the worst reactions have come not from the trans-masculine community at large, but from amidst the growing sub-culture of gay transmen. I boldly took on the self-identity of transfag for a brief time before I was told I was co-opting gay

transmen space because I don’t also identify as a male. I identify as FTM, but apparently this did not appease them. FTM, to many people, means the transition from female to male, starting in one place and ending at another. It is not intended as a place to stay, but is only the transition, the midway. The idea here is that the point of being FTM is to become a male, eventually.

For me, that is not my goal. I don’t want to be a male, and I know I could never be one anyway, because who I am is a transman, completely. I have the body of a trans person, the mind of a trans person, the experience of a trans person, the sexual interaction of a trans person, and all things trans, not male. I was completely excluded from the space after brutal verbal abuse from the moderator of a gay trans group and many of the members. Much of the controversy surrounded the fact that I am exclusive to dating transmen, and I don’t date non-trans men. This group of transmen found this offensive because they believe to be considered different than non-trans men emasculating and devaluing. What they don’t understand is that I highly value and prefer the masculinity of transmen, mainly because it is chosen and continues to be chosen at each injection day (and every day in between). We are men because we consciously want to be all the time (or most of the time or some of the time). But what it comes down to is this question: are all men the same, or are transmen different? People disagree.

There are differing schools of thought on being trans. To me, these opposing schools are as different from each other as creationism is to Darwinism. Some have argued that being a transman is exactly like being a male-born man in every way, except for the surgery. The idea is that we have always been males born into the “wrong” bodies, and after a few snips here and there, we’re back to “normal.” This kind of thinking would have you believe that transmen have the minds of men, the thoughts, feelings, desires, emotions, and therefore the experiences of men. Folks who believe this, think that there is no difference between male-born men and transmen; we are equal in every way: psychologically, sexually, emotionally, socially, and physiologically.

The other, and I think more sound school of thought seeks to respect the masculinities of all those who identify as men, male-assigned at birth or not, but also recognizes the vast differences in the way boys and girls are socialized from an early age. Experiencing the world as a woman, even if it was only for a matter of years, gives us transmen wholly different perspectives – not to mention different kinds of bodies. While non-trans men and transmen share secondary male characteristics, there are things that each of us knows that the other will not (and perhaps cannot) know. It's kind of like understanding the misery of menstrual cramps or knowing exactly how awful a kick in the balls feels, for example.

Because our bodies as transmen are different, the way we have sex is also very different from non-trans men. We may all have dicks of differing varieties, but some transmen's biological equipment can have limitations in terms of penetration and ejaculation. On the upside, we are much more likely to be multi-orgasmic than a non-trans man! And for those of us who bottom, we've got what some refer to as a "bonus hole" that has muscular contractions at different areas and not just the one sphincter muscle. Many of us also have smaller hands than non-trans men which allows for easier fingering and fisting.

But truly, besides all of the physical stuff, there's a kind of bond that I can achieve with my fellow transmen because of our shared experience. They just "get it" without ever having to explain myself. While I certainly know some really cool, respectful, and validating male-born men, our connection just isn't the same. I feel a comfort with transmen that I do not share with male-born men. Other transmen I know have, of course, completely different experiences. Some feel "more trans" when they're around other transmen and that makes them uncomfortable. They prefer male-born men because, with them, they feel "more male," – more "real." Unlike these guys, though, I feel that way when I'm with other transmen. In the presence of a male-born man, I feel constantly aware of my physiological difference from him, making me feel inadequate and insecure.

The point is people see masculinity in different ways, but because I consider the trans-masculine experience unique and remove it, if only slightly, from the non-trans experience, I've been harassed by fellow transmen. I've even been told before that I was transphobic, that I was certainly not trans myself, and that I dangerously fetishize transmen because I prefer to date them over non-trans men. My preference for transmen has been the cause of tremendous offense on more than one occasion. I shouldn't have to really explain why I don't want to date non-trans men; I'm simply not sexually attracted to them when it comes down to it. I've tried. I just don't get hot.

I was told by this group that I can't be a transfag because, even though I pass full-time and live as a man, I don't identify as a male (FTM isn't male enough to this group of transsexuals). Also because I don't date non-trans men, I'm not really gay. They graciously allowed me to retain the use of the label "trannyfag." Apparently, this term includes genderqueers and transmen who date transmen, so I already felt more comfortable affiliating with it.

More recently, a similar group of transmen treated me much the same. These guys aren't gay, but are of the same generation and hold the same belief of being born in the wrong body (a concept I completely respect, by the way. I never quite understood the level of anger that came my way when I really never put anything out there except my existence.)

This time, the argument wasn't about who I date, but how I present my body. I pass full-time as male, without question, but because I don't bind or want top surgery, another uproar ensued. Again, I was accused of not being trans. It didn't really occur to this group that I don't need to bind because I'm very small-chested. It didn't really matter, though, because these guys flew into fury before I could mention that part. In their world, one must get top surgery or plan to get top surgery to truly become a "real man." To them, a man simply does not have breasts.

However, no one asked me how I see my chest. No one cared to listen to me say that I don't consider my chest female at all, and that I've never met any problems with partners or strangers. The only people who've had problems with my chest were a handful of loud transmen who tried to make

me feel ashamed for not binding because they were insecure with their own bodies and projected it to me.

What all of these people, groups and individuals, failed to consider was that my identity, my masculinity, my presentation, my transition, was all just that: MINE. I transitioned for no other reason than because I wanted to and have always wanted to. I wasn't really considering the social ramifications, which are of course, important, but the most important thing was my own personal mental health and emotional well-being. Perception by others is a big part of it, but secondary to self-image.

After the fact of passing, I was more able to concentrate on my slide through social structures. I observe my position as a white man (perceived as gay and straight in different arenas) carefully, and am fully aware of it in every space I enter.

I make conscious decisions about things like how much space I take up, how loud I speak and how often. Personally, I believe this is how I can be a responsible man, accountable for the privilege handed to me. I try often to turn it away, but many times, it's just there, and it is, to be honest, easy.

But I remember not having it.

And I won't forget.

The trans-masculine community will continue to have great divides as long as there are those who only accept trans people who transition (or don't) in exactly the same way as their own sub-culture does (or doesn't). As any marginalized group, we all look for comfort, safety, and support, but the majority of my experiences with many transsexuals and genderqueers have been anything but comfortable, safe, or supportive – simply because I don't label myself as male and because I'm not desperately seeking top surgery. Regardless of all of my similarities, my differences (which I consider comparably minor) excludes and shuns me.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Joshua Bastian Cole is a yankee transplant to the South. After graduating from James Madison University's School of Theatre and Dance, Cole moved to southern Virginia and now currently lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but he will always have Brooklyn in his blood. Cole is pursuing a Masters Degree in History & Culture with a specialization in Queer Theory and Performance from the Union Institute and University. He is a femme-identified trannyfag performance artist and playwright who uses performance as a medium for activism and trans awareness. Cole has been published and seen and heard in newspapers, books, magazines, ezines, photo series, films, radio, and podcasts. His website is: <http://jbastiancole.sridout.com>*