Trans Female Psycho

By Gina Maya Roberts

On 21 October 2018 the New York Times runs a story with the headline: '"Transgender" could be defined out of the existence by Trump administration.' The words are familiar, being evocative of feminist academic and medical consultant Janice Raymond's critique of transsexual identity in 1979, and her call for 'transsexuality to be morally mandated out of existence' (178). A forty year cycle completes its latest iteration.

From where do these cycles emerge? For Morgan Page, they go back at least as far as 1848, when the adoption of anti-crossdressing legislation appears in 34 cities across the United States of America in response to a rise in the visibility of gender-fluidity (2017: 135). Later in the 1920s in Germany, a nascent recognition of transsexuality, as well as a movement representing heteronormative transvestism, is followed by Nazi legislation in 1936 banning all lifestyle expressions and acts perceived as undermining procreation and heteronormative cisgender roles (Sutton, 2012). A pattern of social unease at the idea of gender-fluidity is evident throughout. For Michel Foucault, this discomfort with non-heteronormative behaviour originates in the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism; gender-fluidity begins to be defined at this time as a perversion (1976: 104). Patriarchal capitalism, according to Foucault's analysis, requires a tight, mobile, self-sufficient familial unit that encourages men to work for money and women to work for free domestically and in raising the next generation. Lacan, meanwhile, identifies the power of patriarchal ideology and the processes of normalization: how we are born into the world with ideologies always already in place that serve as the default setting (1997: 65-68). That which is ingrained unconsciously from birth therefore becomes familiar and normal. Everything outside this matrix of ideological normality is an unfamiliar, destabilizing Other, suspected of being unnatural and harmful. Cornellius Castoriadis (2005: 138), and later Judith Butler (1997: 80-81), develop this analysis in terms of ostensibly deviant or marginalized identities, theorizing that those who experience particular oppressions within this ideological matrix may question and challenge the accompanying ideology, or else question and challenge themselves to the point of despair.

Until the 1970s at least, we see the emergence of a transgender female in biography attempting to abandon self-repression for a socially acceptable form of self-expression. The biographical representation projects an appropriate levels of harmlessness, and a sexless, restrained conformity measured against perceived gender norms. As such, the 20th century gets the public representation of the transgender female it deserves and desires, one that does everything possible to be the female a white, middle-class, patriarchal society idealizes, and which studiously avoids any admission that might suggest mental health issues or of gender-fluidity as a sign of sexual perversion.

Yet the trans-gender female of the early twentieth century fights an often losing battle to escape the stigma of perversion and social threat. In fact we see the pathway of representation narrow noticeably at the end of the 1920s and early 1930s as two radically different accounts receive markedly different treatment. In 1928, English novelist Radclyffe Hall sees the publishing of her highly personalized novel *The Well of Loneliness*. The story involves a gender-blurring character named Stephen, born female but sometimes explicitly identifying as male. It is Radclyffe Hall's definitive statement on the condition of inversion – of an individual displaying the characteristics associated with the opposite gender. So controversial for its time is the message that Hall brings in sexologist Havelock Ellis to write a medically-based introduction legitimizing the behaviour being represented. Yet the hostile reaction to the story and its protagonist is immediate: a campaign led by the editor of the Daily Express produces the condemnation: 'I would rather give a healthy boy or a health girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel . . .' (Souhami, 2014). *The Well of Loneliness* is banned for the next 20 years. Only a few years later, in 1931 in Germany, Lili Elbe posthumously publishes her autobiography *Man Into Woman*. Although a more complex text than sometimes regarded, the autobiography plays it safe to the audience of the time: tentative heteronormative romance appears. Little ambiguous blurring of boundaries occurs. Lili Elbe emerges from the initial testicular castration a complete female, her handwriting and voice magically changed into a woman's. *Man Into Woman* does not get banned, as it cagily balances sensationalism with unthreatening, familiar heteronormativity, and a domesticated ideal of femininity. Lili Elbe provides the template for publishing houses and the kind of trans female memoirs and biographies that avoid censorship for the remainder of the 20th century: texts that do everything to reassure the reader that transsexuality is not a perversion or evidence of either a psychopathic nature, or an instability in the gender binary.

Lili Elbe may have tried to play it safe, but the transsexual female remains an exotic and dangerous object within the mainstream. The 1940s sees medical writer David Cauldwell publish *Psychopathia Transexualis*. This work describes transsexuality as an expression of mental ill-health, and transgender impulses as evidence of psychopathic tendencies. Popular culture and visual media in particular increasingly utilise the transsexual female's potentially strikingly subversive physicality for its visual cues to create tension and instability: in 1960 Alfred Hitchcock releases *Psycho*, with the most famous murder scene in cinema history: of a psychopathic man who dresses like his mother. In the 1960s, Gore Vidal writes *Myra Breckenridge*, depicting trans-gender aspiration as the manifestation of a Jekyll-and-Hyde disposition, complete with male rape scene. 1973 sees the publication of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which trans-gendering is tied to Nazis, and genocide, and psychopathic sado-masochism. In pop music too, we see Pink Floyd harness the sensationalism of cross-dressing as sexual perversion for their first big hit *Arnold Layne* in 1967. The trans female psycho, with its implications of identity gone wrong, is a particularly useful object for horror: 1971 sees the release of the Hammer Horror *Dr Jekyll and Sister Hyde*; in 1980, the suspense movie *Dressed to Kill* has a mysterious female murderer who turns out to be a schizophrenic, murderous transsexual; and perhaps most famously, in 1991 *Silence of the Lambs* introduces us to a psychopathic murderer desperate to re-create himself as female. Some examples of crime fiction also find this concept of the trans female psycho irresistible, for example Val McDermid's novel of 1995, *The Mermaids Singing*. One can summarize by saying it is the striking physicality that has contributed to the endurance of the transgender female identity in pop culture as a visual prop for the audience, in a way that other, less immediately visible nineteenth-century perversions such as homosexuality fail.

Yet the potentially striking vision of trans-gender self-expression is not enough in itself to understand the fear, and the association of the transgender female as some kind of monster. The mystery appears greater when examining the facts: there is no pattern, anywhere, of violence from transgender women; indeed the historical pattern of violence exists against them in various forms, be it the state medical complex encouraging electroshock and emetic treatments (Henry: 26), or the high number of physical violence meted out on the street in the form of assault, rape, and murder of transgender women (Henry, 198; Stojne, 2018: 25) in

various European, African, and American contexts. It can be argued that this paradox, of the victims as portrayed complicit of the very violence they suffer, is a historical phenomena, when a particular social group – reviled or distrusted by the majority – is dehumanized as posing a social threat, thereby attracting the very violence it is accused of posing. This phenomena becomes more understandable in relation to transgender women when taking the powerful unconscious influence of heteronormativity into account. Transgender women in fact present two separate kinds of threat, to men and to women, and attract violence and fear in different ways.

From looking at recent murders and the subsequent trials, it could be argued that for some men at least, the transgender female undermines the concept of male difference from female, thereby undermining the artifice of male authority. By transitioning from male to female identity, the transgender female suggests it is possible that the castration of male identity and male authority can occur figuratively as well as literally, reducing the male to some form of domesticated, passive slave – a fantasy in fact played out in some forms of sado-masochistic cross-dressing, as well as being eroticized in literature such as *Ulysses* by James Joyce, in which the protagonist briefly fantasizes his own physical and figurative castration. Perhaps in transgender women, men see a possible, castrated version of themselves. Related to this is the fear of deception (Exotica, 2018: 251): that the sexual attraction to the transgender female implies a weakening of their heteronormative sexuality, with the transgender female as a gateway drug to enjoying homosexuality and to related stigmas of effeminacy, weakness, and perversion. We see these fears of deception in the high numbers of transgender women who are murdered by men who claim at their trial to have been tricked, for example in the case of Islan Nettles, who was murdered in 2013 by a man claiming to be overwhelmed by ‘blind fury’ on discovering Nettles was transgender.

For cisgender women, the threat is arguably greater given the patriarchal power relations between men and women, and it is here that the image of the trans female psycho comes into its own. Lacanian analysis identifies the patriarchal dynamic within the Oedipal structure: the male is ascribed an artificially inflated authority, while the female is concurrently disempowered, becoming and embodying the binary negative of the male (Lacan, 1998: 150). Of the many manifestations of this binary is the threat of violence by men against women.

Conceptions of gender fluidity in turn are viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility; for writers such as Janice Raymond, the fluidity poses a threat, by individuals born into the privilege and violence of the male identity, indeed maintaining some or all of the physical power and threat of a cisgender man. The trans female can be seen, therefore, as a wolf in sheep's clothing, intruding on the space and identity of the vulnerable colonized Otherness of female identity in her safe space. In an echo of this perspective, Rosi Braidotti warns of gender fluidity as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari as undermining the political cause of the female, 'I might recognize this if our social and discursive conditions were based on the equality between the sexes. This not being, as yet, the case, Deleuze's argument overlooks a number of points that are crucial for feminist theory, notably the fact the women's movement came into being on a consensus about women's right to control their own bodies, their sexuality. The demand for autonomy in the social and sexual sphere is the starting point for feminist consciousness' (1991: 119).

The structural inequalities for women within patriarchy may be one source of unease among feminism with the emergence of the transgender female as a figure supposed to have benefitted previously from being male, albeit a male suffering often depression-inducing, or indeed suicide-inducing dysphoria. However, this alone does not explain the discernible evidence of fear by some cisgender women of the transgender female. Much of this appears tied to the threatening physicality of male identity and at the very least, its residue for some in the transgender female. Returning to 1979, we see in Janice Raymond's critique a visceral anxiety with the transgender woman – whom Raymond labels with male pronouns as transsexually constructed lesbian feminists and as a Trojan horse for patriarchy: 'The transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist, having castrated himself, turns his whole body and behaviour into a phallus that can rape in many ways, all the time. In this sense, he performs *total* rape, while also functioning *totally* against women's will to lesbian-feminism' (1979: 112). The emphasis by Raymond on rape is multiple: even after sex-reassignment surgery, the transgender female represents a penetrative threat to female-only spaces. The signification of the phallus and the vagina is here reiterated, with the transgender female as phallus, and the female-only safe space as vagina.

Yet the physicality of the threat is more than just metaphorical, reiterating the one imagined by Hitchcock over fifty years ago: of the vulnerable female in a bathroom space, and the insidious intrusion of a malevolent more physically powerful male in masquerade, their penis as weapon, their intention to rape. We see the significance of the penis especially in the autobiography of transgender female and trans activist Sarah McBride, who at one point is confronted by an angry anti-transgender campaigner on the issue of access to public restrooms (2018: 132):

‘“Sarah!”

‘I turned around to see an angry woman, maybe one of the moms who had showed up to the committee hearing the previous week.

‘“I just have one question for you. Have you had the surgery yet?”

‘“Um. I don’t think that is any of your business,” I replied, stunned.

‘“Oh, I think it is my business,” she insisted. “And if I ever see you in the women’s bathroom with me, I’ll chop it right off.”’

Elsewhere this year, in a British TV debate called *Genderquake* (08.05.18), the two transgender women on the panel are heckled by anti-transgender activists throughout the show, with shouts of, ‘You’re a man!’ and ‘You’ve got a penis!’ One of the anti-transgender speakers on the panel, Sarah Ditum, later tweets her concerns about transgender women with penises in women-only changing rooms. Perhaps one of the most visceral expressions is feminist and academic Julia Long, on the issue of transgender woman Lily Madigan getting a place on a Women’s Only Short-List for political selection on the Labour Party. In this social media outburst, Julia Long combines the concept of transgender female as a colonizing male, with the physical threat of rape embodied by the penis:

‘Entitled, misogynist little prick Liam “Lily” Madigan surrounded by psychologically colonised and seriously wronged young women . . .

Was told he was there as soon as I arrived and nearly exploded. Couldn't fucking believe my ears. Tried to find him in the crowd and was so frustrated that I couldn't (need new glasses). Appalling that he was allowed to participate. "End violence against women" when there's a perp right in our midst?!!

Very grateful to the women who made the *Lesbian not Queer* banner, and the placards saying things like "A penis can never be female," which I was very proud to hold. A small but enraged band of us sang "if a person has a penis he's a man" . . .'

What is apparent in each of these situations is the powerful signification of the penis, identified by Lacan as the phallus, an object ascribed artificially with social signification and authority. The penis in these different scenes is the symbolic male weapon of oppression. This brings us to the importance of corporeality in gender identity. As Rosi Braidotti says more generally, 'The body is then an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces: it is a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc) are inscribed; it is a cultural construction that capitalizes on energies of a heterogeneous, discontinuous and unconscious nature' (2002: 25). Braidotti's language of the interface conforms to the Lacanian concept of the Mirror Phase, as the subject develops awareness of both its bodily independence and vulnerability (Lacan, 1997: 65-68). Lacanian analysis calls this the Imaginary, the process of self-perception in which identity is self-constructed within an ideological matrix. The body's physicality and its socialized significations unite and formulate the illusion of what appears to be a fundamental division, male and female, which for writers like Braidotti are irreducible: 'A mere shift in the empirical referent cannot alter the somatic and psychic traces of sexual otherness. These traces are encrypted in the flesh, like a primordial memory, a genetic data-bank that pre-dates entry into linguistic representation . . . I think that sexual difference is written on the body in a thousand different ways, which includes hormonal and endocrinological evidence' (2002: 46-47). Braidotti's writing reveals the cruciality of bodily identification to both cis and transgender people alike, helping to explain the trauma of gender dysphoria and the desire by some transgender people for various surgeries. Consciously and unconsciously we scan the Other, interpreting, compartmentalizing, reassuring ourselves of our own safety, and preparing ourselves for what we deem to be the appropriate interaction for the individual who stands before us: their

gender, their nationality, race and ethnicity, their normality in relation to our own, and the power dynamic in relation to our own.

The gender binary, then, is deeply inscribed in our unconscious, merging materiality with ideology to a degree of normalization so ingrained that we fail to realize the construction. How then, can the transgender female be anything other than a monster? In some ways, and at this point in the 21st century, history repeats itself. From Africa to the USA to the UK, another cycle of resistance to transgender legitimacy begins in alignment with the 'transgender tipping point' celebrated by Time magazine in 2013. In Africa in the countries of Malawi and Nigeria, legislation is discussed within months of each other in 2008 and later 2014, criminalizing acts of LGBT-related expression. In the USA, in 2016, outgoing President Barack Obama introduces legislation protecting transgender people, including rights for transgender school children to access school restrooms of their identifying gender, as well as the right to fight in the military. But one election later, President Donald Trump begins to repeal these legislations, and then goes further, with the threat of removing transgender identity as a legitimate, legally-protected form of self-expression. In the UK in 2018, a sometimes toxic national debate on the Gender Recognition Act sucks in politicians and national newspaper editorials, producing a cocktail of information and misinformation.

It would take another paper to discuss the situation today in the UK, and this one does not propose to initiate it at this stage. However, it might be worth summarizing on the mythos of the trans female psycho with the current situation in the UK in mind. Much of the language used to discuss transgender women in particular includes the threat of violence. To return to the studio discussion *Genderquake*, in which the two trans women were heckled throughout with 'You're a man,' and 'You've got a penis,' it is worth noting the article written by feminist and anti-transgender campaigner Sarah Ditum in *The Guardian* newspaper the next day. The Gender Recognition Act, warns Ditum, 'creates a loophole for violent men,' to intrude into female-only spaces.' Ditum similarly uses her reflection to inform the reader that generally, 'Women who take part in discussions that take a critical view on prospective changes to the Gender Recognition Act risk physical attack.' Presumably, this is in reference to a single incident at a protest and counter-protest between trans and anti-trans activist in 2017, when trans female Tara Wolf became involved in a confrontation with an anti-trans

activist who was filming her, with Wolf striking out at her. This at least, was the only example of trans female violence against an anti-transgender activist I could find, and it appears that this single example has becoming seized upon as proof that there is something violent about the thousands if not tens of thousands of transgender women who live their lives in the UK often watching over their shoulder in case they get attacked by transphobic men.

Yet less hostile voices also wrote after the *Genderquake* discussion and it is here that we see the possibility of a more sympathetic and sophisticated debate on transgender women's rights. As Amrou Al Kadhi writes in *The Independent* the day after the debate, the starting point for any discussion must surely be the acceptance of transgender women as both legitimate and a minority who suffer hugely within patriarchy. Al Kadhi draws on some of the many recent examples of data highlighting suicide and self-harm among transgender people, with the recurring number of 40% of trans people attempting suicide in both the USA and the UK. Other important statistics for any discussion should be the high rates of violence suffered by transgender women, many of whom being reduced through employment discrimination to homelessness and prostitution and in turn daily exposure to violence and the multi-faceted threats found in the illegal economy (Henry, 2017: 200, 206; McBride, 2018: 4). To ignore these facts, and attempt to represent transgender women in complete opposition of the facts as some kind of violent threat, is only ever going to prompt resentment and hostility from transgender activism and a breakdown in any meaningful dialogue. Transgender women, and those sympathetic to them, are now increasingly at the stage of refusing to enter such live TV debates where they are meant to justify their own existence in an environment where they are heckled and abused. As cited by Al Kadhi, transgender and non-binary artist Travis Alabanza says, following their own refusal to be a panellist on the *Genderquake* discussion for the very reasons that would play out, 'What we are seeing on TV and media is a lack of understanding about the urgency of trans politics, the epidemic of violence trans people are under, and how this cries for programming that doesn't "debate" our existence, but rather focuses on understanding and listening to what our community is saying and needs.'

Simultaneously, the concerns of many women about their safe spaces is a historical reality. These fears, evident over the past hundred years in pop culture and elsewhere, can and should

be discussed. Yet in order to discuss such fears openly, the fear-mongering by those whose agenda appears to be the denial of transgender experience, has to be seen for what it is: a dehumanizing projection upon a disempowered minority. And for anyone who thinks my words are in themselves a form of fear mongering or partisan bias, look up at the news and the language being used by those in power, of transgender identity to be potentially mandated out of existence, of the implicit and explicit associations by particular critics of transgender women with violence, and finally, the hundreds of murders every year around the globe of transgender women by those who see transgender women as posing the threat of violence.

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