

Queering Gender Identity Work: A Life History of a Black Transgender Woman

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of the identity work of a black transgender woman through life history research. Identity work pertains to the ongoing effort of authoring oneself and positions the individual as the agent; not a passive recipient of identity scripts. The findings draw from three life history interviews. Using thematic analysis, the following themes emerge: institutionalisation of gender norms; gender and sexuality unintelligibility; transitioning and passing; and lastly, gender expression and public spaces. The discussion follows from a poststructuralist conception of identity, which frames identity as fluid and as being continually established. The study contends that identity work is a complex and fragmented process, which is shaped by other social identities. To that end, the study also acknowledges the role of collective agency in shaping gender identity.

Keywords: transgender; identity work; life history; queer theory; intersectionality; transphobia; South Africa

Introduction

South Africa is a society in transition, coming out of the apartheid rule into democracy and moulding a “new” and inclusive nation “in which all can live and prosper,” as Nelson Mandela proclaimed. The South African Constitution enshrines the rights of non-normative gender and sexual identities (Croucher 2002, 315). Specifically, the law makes provision for transgender people to alter their sex characteristics and change their gender marker on their identity documents. The term transgender encompasses the wide range of histories and experiences of individuals whose sense of self does not conform to the gender assigned to them at birth (Carrera, DePalma and Lameiras 2012, 997).

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Within a cisnormative society—a society that advantages and privileges individuals whose assigned sex and gender identity aligns—transgender people are compelled to fit in, that is align with the gender binary, and as such “signs of transness often become invisible in direct proportion to successfully passing as the gender of one’s experience” (Van der Wal 2016). This compulsion is often the outcome of the rigid religious, cultural, and medico-legal frameworks that remain strong and authoritative referents from which understandings and interpretations of gender identity and expression take their meaning. As captured by the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act no. 49 of 2003, the legal and medical discourses on gender in South Africa frame gender as an inevitable consequence of one’s sex. The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act no. 49 of 2003, states that an individual can alter their sex description if they have undergone surgery or hormone replacement therapy. This process needs to be validated by a medical professional who administered the procedure and a psychologist or social worker (Government Gazette 2004, 4). To an extent, this Act echoes cisnormative gender norms which privilege the alignment of assigned sex at birth with gender identity; for example, a person assigned-male-at-birth “should” and will “identify” as a man/boy. Sex is assumed to, always, align with gender. Gender binaries, in conjunction with sexuality categories, are policed severely; as DePalma and Francis (2014) posit that even with the provisions in the Constitution that protect the rights of sexual and gender minorities, the social realities in South Africa are not so encouraging.

The present study aims to add to the limited but growing scholarship on counter-normative gender identities in South Africa and offers an in-depth exploration of transgender identity using queer theory and intersectionality as frameworks. I use the notion of “identity work” to capture the idea that authoring oneself in any aspect of life involves an ongoing effort. Identity work positions the author as an agent rather than as a recipient of (gender) identity scripts (Calabrese-Barton, Hosun Kang, Tan, O’Neill, Bautista-Guerra and Brecklin 2013, 2). Identity work is an intentional and continual negotiation of identity. It recognises that enactment and articulation of the self does not occur in isolation from the socio-political contexts that one navigates. Similarly, gender is shaped by race, class, and sexuality, among other social identities. For Butler (1988, 520), gender carries a sense of performativity which speaks to the continual negotiation and enactment of the gendered self. Gender speaks to culturally, institutionally, and discursively influenced ways of being in the world and through which our bodies become intelligible in the social hierarchy. In this light, gender scripts are one example through which individuals make inputs and adapt these according to how they think and feel they ought to be. There is no one way of doing gender; of being a cis- or trans woman, cis- or trans man, or non-binary. Gender, therefore, is by no means a stable and fixed category.

The Literature on Transgender Research in South Africa

Transgender research in South Africa remains nascent in its scope. The minimal research done on transgender identity has focused largely on violence, depravity, and illness narratives (Jobson, Theron, Kim, and Kaggwa 2012; Samudzi and Mannell 2016). It is important to highlight these aspects of the lived realities of some transgender people in South Africa; and the need to create awareness and inform policies that deal with the violence against transgender people. A significant obstacle that researchers focusing on transgender people encounter, is the lack of access to transgender individuals (Jobson et al. 2013). The research that does focus on transgender identities, therefore, usually includes small samples (see Francis 2014; Van der Wal 2016). There is also limited research that focuses on sexuality, desire and pleasure in the trans community; and none on transgender or gender non-conforming children in South Africa. Nevertheless, current research on trans likewise highlights important issues with regards to trans visibility, access to medical and legal resources for gender reassignment purposes and the social meaning/constructions of (trans) masculinity.

Van der Wal (2016)—in a study investigating the discursive and material impact of “coming out” on trans identities—argues for “a conception of being trans as something that is neither completely open and visible, nor totally secret.” Van der Wal found that visibility of the trans subject through photography “displaces the voyeuristic gaze that has long grazed trans bodies” (Van der Wal 2016). Through this medium of representation, centred on a transman, Van der Wal’s study underscores the agency that trans people have over how they are seen and depicted. When an individual is visibilised within a gender context, it follows that certain signs and codes of intelligibility locate the individual as either man or woman, subject to the contextual understandings and conceptions of gender (Van der Wal 2016). In the conceptualisation of normative and non-normative gender identities and gender expressions, appearance plays a profound role. For example, dress code and mannerisms are interpreted through a variety of socially gendered scripts, that make individuals become intelligible and thus can be categorised as embodying a certain gender identity. Working with representation through photographic records, Van der Wal (2016) suggests that the visibility of trans identities is more complex than providing a visual reference. Visibility, and thus recognition, becomes a site of power through which a person is differently reproduced. That is, a person is read differently in the social contexts he/she/they participate(s) in, owing to local understandings and views of gender. Similarly, Francis (2014), using a life history study, explores the ways in which a transgender life orientation teacher enacts, resists and reproduces dominant understandings of gender and sexuality. Francis (2014) reports on the continuum of masculinities (enacted by Thato, the participant in his study), that are shaped by the rural social context he participates in. This is particularly visible in the instance where Thato is “shown more respect and his ideas taken up ... compared to the black women in his context,” and in some instances where his masculinity is called into question and

policed when he stands up for his woman colleagues (Francis 2014). The enactment of masculinity by a transgender man is thus complicated by the local understandings of and expectations for men. Thato is visibilised through patriarchal understandings of masculinity and fashions himself according to these scripts. Importantly, Francis (2014) reports that Thato refers to himself as a “lesbian man,” which he uses to refer to “someone who is born as a woman but who identifies now as a man and who has sex with women.” This reference speaks to the non-unitary essence of language in which terms of identification take on different meanings and embodiments in different contexts. In this instance, transgender gender identity emerges as a negotiated experience.

In a qualitative study featuring 26 transgender and intersex people, Husakouskaya (2013) investigated the extent to which meanings can be unravelled in a rethinking of the constructed meaning of gender and human rights in light of the narratives of transgender and intersex individuals living in South Africa. Husakouskaya (2013) particularly notes the significance of the process of how the participants named themselves as a sign of visibilising and claiming their identity. Husakouskaya (2013) argues that the participants’ process of naming themselves is both an act of recognition and a strategic act of positioning themselves in order to access resources that enable them to fashion themselves accordingly, through using the language and gendered terms. In addition, Husakouskaya (2013, 13) found that the use of different gendered terminology allowed the participants to access information, support networks, medical services, non-governmental organisations and academic research. The participants’ strategic positioning of themselves in relation to available resources highlights the complex process that is involved in transgender identity work. It also underscores the navigation of different channels to access resources that are fundamental to being and presenting an authentic self. The naming process is fundamental to identity work, it is an act of visibilising and of claiming one’s identity and adds a critical layer in negotiating one’s positionality in society.

As the literature shows, transgender people author themselves through various means—from appropriating gendered terms, which they do not specifically identify with, in order to access the resources that enable them to live fully as themselves and being the protagonists in their trans narratives. The literature positions transgender people as constantly negotiating the experience of their identities and becoming strategic in their alignment with gendered expectations. Furthermore, very few of the studies (Francis 2013; Van der Wal 2016) highlight the agency that transgender people have in narrating their stories and challenge the dominant notion of transgender lives as determined by violence and/or illness narratives. Owing to this, the present study explores the complexity of transgender lives through a queer and intersectional framework.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon queer theory to develop an expansive understanding of transgender identity work and inquire into the cis-heteronormative understandings of gender in relation to transgender identities. Butler (1999), a proponent of queer theory, argues that identity is not a static category that people take on or is imposed on them as assumed through the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix serves as a “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalised” (Butler 1999, 194). In order to be recognised as a culturally intelligible individual, one has to adhere to the strict male or female gender binary by performing a gender that matches that of the sexed body and express a desire for the opposite sex. Transgender identities transgress the intelligibility as per the heterosexual matrix and render the question of gender and sexuality open-ended. Despite the existence of transgender identities there have been unbearable silences in discourse and literature documenting non-normative gender and sexual identities (De Lauretis 1991; Seidman 1994; Stein and Plummer 1994). This is where queer theory assists in highlighting the lack of representation of non-normative gender identity work and addresses the silences from literature by putting the focus on gender as a free-floating category—as opposed to the stable and fixed gender as characterised through the heterosexual matrix (Butler 2004). Queer theory is an appeal to the massive transgression of all conventional categorisations and analyses; it breaks boundaries around the construction and conception of gender (Stein and Plummer 1994). Transgender identities unsettle the categories on which normative gender and sexualities depend for their articulation (Prinsloo 2011). Similarly, gender and sexuality scholarship in South Africa applies and challenges the terminology originating from scholarship in the global North (Francis and Reygan 2016; Stobie 2014; Swarr 2012).

Francis and Reygan (2016) argue that although much queer theorising originates from the global North (Europe and North America), they caution against the wholesale application of these theoretical frameworks in the global South. Queer scholarship has remained uncritical of gender and sexualities from other geographical locations and centred individual agency; thus, as Msibi (2014, 4) argues, researchers need to be cognisant of the history and practices in Africa when theorising about African sexualities and gender diversity. Consequently, my study remains cognisant of the structural influences and historical implications of identity in South Africa. The “creative borrowing” of queer theory is particularly important in the South African context to enunciate and explicate the nuances of identity. As Said (1983) contends, while theories emerge from particular traditions, they nevertheless facilitate intellectual activity in the new context they are considered in. It is to this end that I engage queer theory to explore new ways of theorising about discourse on gender in South Africa.

The study also draws on intersectionality, a framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking

systems of privilege and oppression at the macrostructural level (Bowleg 2012, 1267). While structural intersectionality concerns the “ways in which the individual’s legal status or social needs marginalise them as a result of their convergence of identity statuses” (Shields 2008, 304), in this paper I argue for a greater awareness of the complexity and multiplicities of identities that allow for different experiences of being transgender in South Africa. Furthermore, I argue that there is no catch-all narrative of transgender identities that exclusively summarises the experiences of transgender people and thus can be taken as the overarching narrative. Intersectionality approach is particularly relevant in contemporary South Africa to understand how gender identity is negotiated.

Through reforms in policies, the state has played a significant role in legitimising transgender identities in South Africa. However, the legal legitimisation of transgender identities is not evenly accessible to all transgender individuals because of differential access to resources. Moreover, the expression and social visibility of transgender identities are contingent on the interplay between economic, racial, and educational factors. Thus, given the intersectionality of social identities, it is important to note that the convergence of identity statuses, negotiation and expression, will yield unique forms of transgender identities (Shields 2008).

An intersectional approach to studying gender identity work over time enables an inquiry into and a recognition of the complexity of the process of identity work in context and obligates us to be cognisant of the flexibility of identity statuses throughout an individual’s life.

Life History Research

Life history research is particularly relevant to studying identity work over time, as it allows various aspects of human experience to come to the fore, and it situates the individual’s life experiences within a specific historical, cultural and socio-political framework. Understanding the participant’s identity work through relations between self, the spatial and structural/institutional influences, enables us to make sense of the person in relation to a broader collective experience (Cole and Knowles 2001). Life history research necessitates small samples or individual subjects because the approach involves protracted observation or extensive interviewing (Dhunpath 2000, 548). I met Whitney, the participant in this study, at a meeting about life coaching in Cape Town. While we were talking about studying and research, Whitney took interest in the research study I was undertaking as part of my graduate studies. The study looks at how a black transgender individual authors themselves over the course of their life. Whitney, a self-identified transgender woman, offered to participate in the study. I must acknowledge my positionality in this study. As a non-binary black individual, I am drawn to scholarship that seeks to trouble essential understandings of gender and allows

for an exploration of the complexity of the continuum of gender; scholarship that speaks to my own experiences of gender and those of other transgender peoples.

Data Collection

I conducted three audio-recorded, semi-structured, face-to-face life history interviews of one hour each. These interviews were conducted in Stellenbosch, in the space of a week, allowing one day between the interviews. The reason for this was to allow Whitney time to reflect on the previous interview, and to transcribe the audio recordings and generate questions for the following interviews (Seidman 1991).

Analysis

The collected interview data were analysed using thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). The organisation and description of data proceed from the literature discussed and other themes that emanate from the data. Before describing the observed patterns, thematic data analysis requires that the researchers familiarise themselves with the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). As such, after each interview I transcribed the interviews and went through the data to follow up on and verify the information shared. This analysis involved searching for themes, listing them and identifying sentences and words that seemed to construct an idea in relation to the guiding critical question, which asked how does a black transgender individual author herself over the course of her life. The analysis was informed by a poststructuralist framework that aims to delineate the discursive construction of gender.

Ethical Considerations

I obtained ethical clearance for this study from the Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University. The participant signed a consent form prior to the start of the interviews. I explained the research process and the protocol for anonymity and identity concealment. The participant requested that her name was not to be concealed, arguing for more visibility of transgender people, especially black rural transgender people.

Findings

The findings are presented as four themes and are presented to allow Whitney to “speak” to and frame her life history. The first theme shows how Whitney was socialised into cishnormative gender roles, illustrating the extent to which her gender was regulated through her gender expression. The second explores gender and sexuality unintelligibility and how Whitney comes to appropriate a language/words as a way of articulating her

identity and resisting the gender roles forced on her. The third addresses Whitney's social and medical transitioning. The last theme deals with the gender intelligibility in public spaces and how Whitney exercises her agency and subjectivity in authoring the person she visions herself to be—aligning herself with a certain idea of femininity.

Early Socialisation

Whitney is a 40-year-old coloured, and an identified transgender woman who grew up on a farm not far from Cape Town. She grew up with a mother and a father, and her four siblings. Whitney was raised in a coloured community. She grew up speaking Afrikaans and went to a predominantly coloured school. Her father, a black Xhosa man who worked at the farm, was prohibited by the white farm owners from speaking to his family in IsiXhosa or to practise any of his culture or traditions. Whitney recalls: "I grew up in a place where in the evenings the whites would come stand at our windows to hear what language my family spoke." As a child, Whitney enjoyed playing dollhouse with her cousins and her parents allowed her to dress in mostly girls' clothes. Between ages four and five she noted that her "physical body and psychological body do not talk the same language." Even though her parents allowed her to wear girls' clothes, this soon changed when she was about to start school. A week prior to starting primary school, Whitney—who had long thick hair "that looked like a girl's hair"—was forced to shave her head, to look like other boys. When Whitney protested the shaving of her head—and refused to wear the boys' school uniform that her parents had bought her—she received beatings from her father. It was at this point that Whitney realised there were different expectations for boys and girls. When she transgressed these roles and expectations, she was frowned upon and physically punished.

Although Whitney took on a feminine presentation from childhood, she mentions that she could not articulate her identity to herself nor her family—she could not say whether she was a boy or a girl. When her parents bought her a boys' school uniform, she could not understand why she was expected to wear the boys' school uniform. She felt she could not speak up for herself as she did not have the language to articulate herself regarding who she was. Whitney recalls: "My parents and myself ... we didn't know about transgenderism ... they just saw this, me, as a challenge." Whitney concluded that her parents thought that her feminine presentation, wearing her hair long and choosing to wear female clothes, was a phase and upon realising that it was not, the only way they could respond to her was to beat her into wearing a boys' school uniform.

Schooling presented a different environment for Whitney in which her gender expression was challenged. Part of the practices of the school that she attended were traditionally gendered practices executed through school routines such as song and dance; which Whitney stated were not her traditions. Whitney recalled an instance in primary school, where she had to pair up with a classmate of the "opposite" gender, a girl with a boy. There was a boy in the class whom Whitney "had a crush on" and when this boy came to

her direction, Whitney grabbed the boy's hand to partner with him, to the boy's dismay. After this incident, Whitney was reprimanded by her teacher in front of the class and was told: "You're a boy, and you have to act like a boy." After that incident, Whitney stopped participating in the song and dance practice at her school:

I just refused to partake in those, and it was really tradition, and it wasn't even our tradition because if you take myself, I come not even from a coloured family, I come from a black family, and all those traditional plays [were] white traditions, it was not even our tradition so it was like forced tradition on us.

These traditions or school routines serve as a powerful socialisation tool for gender and underscore the abiding heteronormative framing of gender.

Regarding sport activities at school, Whitney did not participate in soccer or rugby as was expected of all boys at the school. To avoid participating in these sports, as was expected of her at the school, she says she would laugh each time she went to either the soccer or rugby fields. To the annoyance of her teachers, she would be chased off the field and her parents called into the school. When asked why she would not participate in either soccer or rugby, Whitney replied by asking her teachers: "Why can't I play netball?" At the school, netball was compulsory for girls, and Whitney wanted to be a part of the netball team. She recounts:

I have a very great imagination. So, when the girls were playing netball it's like I was with them on the field, I was playing with them. I saw myself in them. And in a way, it encouraged me to do something at the rugby or soccer field so that I can be chased away, then into the netball field. It was like I was part of the team.

Whitney mentions that she was not the only gender non-conforming student at the school: "I can remember in high school there were other gender non-conforming kids, but the two of us, Cy* and I, we were very 'out' if you can say it like that." When it comes to the lines at school, in which boys had to stand on one side and girls on the other, Whitney mentions that she and Cy* would stand between the boys' and girls' lines. When asked by the teachers why they stood in the middle they responded: "You said this is where the boys and girls should stand, but you never said where the 'moffies' should stand." This word was used by one of her teachers who told her "you must stop being a 'moffie'" and subsequently threw a dustbin at her. Whitney started to claim the word "moffie": "As much as the word hurts us, we started to claim it because now we had something to identify with." Reclaiming a word that denigrates and diminishes is a way to push back and resist being defined by the other.

Gender and Sexuality Unintelligibility

Whitney could not understand why she was being called a "moffie" and being prohibited from taking part in netball. She did not feel pressured to identify with the word "moffie,"

as it was understood in her community at the time as not so much as a gender identity but an act, a sexual act. In addition, the word “moffie” had negative connotations and Whitney mentions that she learned from an early age that the word “moffie” was a bad word, suggesting that she was a deviant other. Whitney recounts that when people think of “moffie” in her community, they immediately think of sexual intercourse, more specifically homosexuality. “I’m not a sexual act, I am a person,” she asserts. Whitney recalls an incident where her father beat her and shouted at her, warning her: “You can’t be a ‘moffie,’ men will have sex with you in your anus.”

Tired of getting beaten up by her father and wanting to keep the peace, Whitney resorted to wearing boys’ clothes and attending church in boys’ suits. The church was a big part of Whitney’s upbringing, she recalls having to wear men’s suits just so that she could go to church and fit in. She recounts:

I tried so hard to fit into the gender norm ... at church I was wearing suits ... I was trying hard to fight for the love of God. The church wanted me to cut my hair ... we do everything to be accepted, to be treated normally. But I don’t think it changed how I felt inside.

Both the church and the family were influential in Whitney’s early years, shaping her self-perception and being a source of kinship and belonging if she performed a gender act that corresponds with her assigned sex, which is being a boy.

Transitioning and Passing

In 2000, a few years after finishing high school, Whitney began her social transition. This entailed having a discussion with her family, telling them she was going to dress like a woman. At home, her family accepted her and her mother asked her not to wear short skirts in her father’s presence. The church on the other hand rejected her and required that she be “cleansed” if she was to continue with church duties. Whitney recalls that during this time at her church nobody stood up for her and in her rural community “everything is Bible based ... if you’re against it, you’re the devil himself.” It was also during this time that Whitney started experimenting with alcohol. Whitney began to question God: “I was questioning my faith in God,” but never lost her love for God. She maintains that she is a Christian: “Even now I think I have the most amazing relationship with Him [God]. But there are things I question when it comes to the Bible.”

As she grew older, into her mid-20s, Whitney began to describe herself as “a girl with a male body.” It was not until 2006 (at the age of 29) that Whitney first heard of the word transgender. This was after her a manager at the job she was working at put her in touch with an organisation that works with gender diverse people. It was during a time Whitney experienced psychological distress emanating from hearing a sermon against gay and lesbian people at a funeral she had attended. After speaking to an individual from the organisation, who subsequently counselled her telephonically, Whitney states that she began to feel relief. She accounts that during these telephonic sessions, she

was asked, for the first time ever, how she felt about her body, and how she saw her body. After the telephone session, Whitney attended a workshop facilitated by the same organisation, in which she met and spoke to people who identified as transgender. As she was learning about what transgender is and started calling herself transgender, she would go back home and share the information with her parents. Whitney recalls:

When I had this conversation with my parents in 2000, I told them I am gay ... and for us at that time gay meant a male person who wears female clothes. So, when I started to understand what gay and trans is in 2006-7 I really went home and told them this is what it means, so I educated them about myself.

Having a language to articulate her identity and educate her parents, led to her parents accepting and supporting her. On the word transgender, Whitney asserts: "Now here you have a word that describes who I am from inside out, how I identify, it was for me and still is a much better word." The word transgender resonated with her and did not have the same connotations as the word "moffie" which was used a lot to refer to her. It was not until two years after the telephonic counselling sessions and subsequent workshops that Whitney began to think about medically transitioning. During this time, Whitney worked for an organisation that caters to the needs of gender diverse individuals. As she took on this journey, Whitney considered a name change: "Although the name my parents gave me was a gender-neutral name, they gave it to a boy child." Having a name that captures who she is and having chosen that name herself, Whitney says "is the greatest feeling ever."

In the process of medically transitioning, that is being on hormone replacement therapy, Whitney laments the absence of her mother who could not be there to see her physically transform into the woman she has always been. Whitney recalls the day she had a conversation with her mother, who at the time had been diagnosed with lung cancer, and she told her about her application to have her names changed. She recalls her mother's words to her: "She said if that makes you happy then I'm happy, and I can die happy." Her mother died from complications with lung cancer.

Whitney's transition journey continued and through the help of a non-governmental organisation, she was able access the psychological services that were requisite for her medical transition. She mentions that she encountered resistance from the doctors she approached who told her to first do her research, and nurses who had no idea what she meant by wanting to start hormone replacement therapy. The lack of education about transgender issues at the health facilities led her to contact a public hospital in Cape Town. Through the help of the organisation, she was assisted to start her medical transitioning.

Gender Expression and/in Public Spaces

Whitney mentions that as she is a few years into her hormone replacement therapy, she passes more as a woman. Whitney recalls a moment in her place of work, the organisation that caters to the needs of transgender individuals, when a cisgender male colleague, upon finding out that she is trans, changed in how he related to her. “He changed the way he greeted me, the grip changed, when he found out I started my life with a penis, the grip was for a man.” The change in people’s behaviour when they find out that she is a transgender woman complicates the way she feels about passing. She maintains that in her line of work, trans activism, passing is not received kindly because, to an extent, it erases the trans identity. On the other hand, passing plays a big role in safely navigating public spaces. Whitney mentions that when out in public, she is always aware of her appearance: “I always think, do I look female enough.” She constantly asks herself if there is any trace of “maleness” in her look:

Will people see that I shave? Is my face smooth? Because even though I am on hormone treatment, the hormones do not take away your facial hair totally. I wonder, is my eyeliner correctly on? Because I think, people can tell when a transwoman wears makeup ... a transwoman is a little bit extra, especially the base because we have to cover so much.

As she is seen and read as a woman, Whitney has a problem with suggestions of how to be more feminine: “I don’t like when people try to tell me that trans women need to talk a certain way, they need to walk a certain way, they need to present a certain way.” This affirmation of a certain womanhood through bodily gestures and appearance, Whitney maintains, is prevalent among transgender women themselves where trans women who have had surgeries and are on hormone replacement therapy are seen as more feminine than trans women who have not undergone any medically transitioning. “Being on hormones doesn’t make me a better person than the other,” Whitney states.

Physical appearance also plays a role in romantic relationships. Whitney recalls a moment in a relationship she was in prior to medically transitioning, where the then boyfriend’s mother remarked that her son was not gay. Whitney mentions that she had to remind the woman that indeed her son was not gay, because “he was dating a woman, me, a woman with a different body.” Another instance that keeps Whitney conscious of her appearance is when men look at her or talk to her in public spaces. “In my head it is like, is he talking to me because I’m female or is it because I’m trans.”

There are also gender expectations of her in relationships. In one particular relationship, her boyfriend at the time “would ask if I was not going to put on make-up before going out.” Appearing as feminine as possible for Whitney is a two-way street, it is vital for her safety and the safety of her significant other. “It’s too much energy, especially when I hadn’t medically transitioned. There’s that pressure that people can’t know I have a beard ... I also need to protect him, so that we don’t get attacked.” In personal encounters, when potential romantic interests find out that she is a transgender woman,

“sometimes after kissing me, and then finding out I still have a penis ... the look of disgust on their faces ... makes you fear for your life.” Importantly, Whitney maintains that she does not see why she should mention that she is transgender as she begins interacting with people:

I do not think I should out myself as a transwoman unless there is going to be, [we are] going to have sex with each other. I think what we do wrong is we don't allow people to know the person that is inside of us first, we only allow people to know the physical body first ... what genitals we have. Because no cis woman puts on her profile, “I'm a cis woman.”

Whitney mentions that when she goes back to her community, where she grew up, people look at her differently. “I think there's a bit of change in the way people back home see me. They still use my original name, but with female pronouns ... I am not a sexual act anymore, I am a human being.” She is now seen as a woman and not a “moffie.” The change in the way Whitney is perceived perhaps has to do with the hormone replacement therapy and her performance of the conventional feminine.

Discussion

In this section, I bring the paper to a close with a discussion of the findings. The first part deals with the institutionalisation of gender in early socialisation, and how institutions uphold and enforce gender norms that produce the deviant “other.” The second part, following the framing by using intersectionality, elaborates on the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and language. The last part engages with agency and highlights the role of collective agency in the identity work of Whitney.

Institutions remain strong and authoritative referents from which understandings and interpretations of gender take their meaning. Gender is constructed around acts, which are either positively or negatively reinforced. As is evident in Whitney's life history, her parents draw on a dominant discourse where gender is constructed as a binary and understood as fixed and unchanging. This understanding denies counter normative gender expressions which are punished verbally or physically. Equally important is the role that schooling plays in shaping gender norms, as is evident in the life history. Scholars have reported on the heteronormative and compulsory heterosexual environments in schools (see Francis 2017a; 2017b, Msibi 2012). Studies (DePalma and Francis 2014; Francis, 2013) also show how cisnormativity and heterosexuality are reinforced through school traditions, notably the matric dance and in some schools standing in separate lines, which are demarcated by gender. Notwithstanding the importance of corporeal differentiation in the production and maintaining of gender stereotypes, school also recognises masculine and feminine difference and inequality through constructs of sexuality. Whitney's story is testament to the abiding heteronormative and cisnormative constructions of gender, which are well-documented in research into the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in South African schools (Francis 2017b; Msibi 2012).

School rituals, such as the song and dance, also enforce the heterosexual matrix where the students are expected to identify with the gender they are assigned and subsequently desire to pair up with a student of the “opposite” gender. The heterosexual matrix refers to gender intelligibility that assumes that in order for bodies to make sense, they must be expressed through a stable sex and a stable gender defined through the practice of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1999). The school’s song and dance tradition reifies the idea that gender identity is fixed and is enacted in a universal way according to either feminine/girl or masculine/boy gender scripts. At the same time, Whitney also resists the gender scripts and troubles the prescribed binaries. Her reappropriation of the word “moffie,” for example, is subversive and resists the imposition of masculinity and femininity in school. Appropriating of certain words helps to destabilise the “normative standards that are used to limit how we speak and name ourselves as a necessary eruption” (Matebeni and Msibi 2015, 5). Appropriating the word “moffie,” as Whitney has shown, becomes a means to disrupt and expose the fragility of the essentialising of the gender binary.

Using an intersectional lens to think about gender is useful, as it complicates identity work. An intersectional framing contextualises the influence of the multiple dimensions of identity such as sexual orientation, language, race and socioeconomic status on how actors navigate gender. For example, a black transwoman with a university education and an unemployed white transman, both living in Woodstock, may conduct their gender identity work significantly different as race and class remain pivotal within the social and political context of a democratic South Africa. Whitney’s life story emphasises the complexity of gender work in a context of racism, heteronormativity and cisnormativity. To understand how actors navigate gender, it is crucial to take into account how intersecting identities privilege or marginalise identity work. What Whitney’s life history brings to the fore, is that gender—like other social identity categories—cannot be studied independently nor can it be studied apart from the systems that maintain inequality. Also significant is the apparent conflation of sex, gender and sexuality in the instance where Whitney is referred to as a “moffie,” a homophobic slur used to refer to homosexual men. Due to her feminine presentation, she is seen as a gay man and not as a gender non-conforming person. Reygan and Lynette (2014) report on a similar finding in their study regarding the conflation of gender and sexuality in South Africa, where lesbian and gay men are purported to be “wanting to be the opposite sex.” The conflation of sex, gender and sexuality exemplifies the notion that there are only two genders, which are expressed in rigid and essentialised ways. Sex difference is taken as a priori; it comes before and thus determines gender. The conflation of sex, gender and sexuality is epitomised in the linguistic coding of gender and sexual diversity through the catch-all phrase “moffie.” Research by Sigamoney and Epprecht (2013), for example, has shown that the terms/words used to refer to gender or sexuality plurality vary—while the words used to define gender and sexual diversity carry negative connotations, they are rooted in a cis and heteronormative discourse. Within these constructions of

difference gender and sexuality diversity is considered taboo, and policed. In addition, it is important to note the linguistic differences owing to the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual context of South Africa. In Whitney's life story, the word "moffie" is used to refer to her counter normative gender expression, which was taken to be a signifier of her sexuality. Language, in this context, is used to embed the binary construction of gender and by implication to exclude and "other" counter normative individuals. Msibi (2012) notes the embeddedness of homophobia and heterosexism in language. Particularly important is the context specificity of language in the lives of gender diverse individuals. Words do not carry the same connotations across the board; they are altered and adapted to certain contexts through "discomforts, public health discourses and critiques of identity categories" (Matebeni and Msibi 2015, 3).

Finally, Francis and Reygan (2016) write that agency, in the West, is framed in individualistic terms denying continuity between self and other and separating the individual from belonging in the community. Whitney's agency is rooted in the collective—her family, colleagues, transgender therapy group, and the organisation that affirms and supports gender diverse individuals. Within her social relations there are elements of support and affirmation. Her social network of support also strengthens her resilience. The collective support is important in trans identity work; as is noted in Whitney's life story. Importantly, as is shown through Whitney's life history, transitioning is not an individualistic linear process. Family, friends and community are an integral part of the process. Needless to say, human lives are nested in and influenced by social relations (Namaste 1994). Whitney's life emphasises the impact of collective agency and the extent to which collaboration and education is useful to challenge transphobia and ignorance.

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