Chapter Five
The marked body:
A do-it-yourself guide to sex and gender
in the twenty-first century

There is something about being both male and female,
about having an entry into both worlds.
(Anzaldúa 1987:19)

In this chapter the marked body will be explored: specifically, the ways in which new technologies and discursive practices mark bodies as being sexed and gendered will come under scrutiny. The marked body in my analysis refers to the textual construction of both sex and gender, and how bodies are re-marked or re-written whenever sex is changed and gender is swapped. I have argued previously that gender “writes” (constructs) sex just as sex “writes” gender, and in this interactive writing process, bodies are marked as sexed and gendered. What concerns me here is the crucial, yet strategically obscured, part played by new technologies in the creation of new sex and gender categories such as transgenderism (specifically in virtual gender-swapping) and transsexuality (sex/gender reassignment procedures).

The ramifications of these new sex and gender categories for embodiment are teased out in this chapter. In the case of the marked body, although present – for there is a body (both constructed and real) present – the body in question takes on different permutations and
combinations apparently at **random**. The law of subjective volition guides the apparent randomness with which these “otherly” sexed and gendered bodies, which do not fit into simplistic binary categories, emerge. It is often assumed that both gender and sex are consumer choices to be made by a subject agency, whose desires spread without limits over a globalised economy. Sex and gender are both perceived as manageable and controllable in the reconstruction of the marked body as sex can be changed and gender can be swapped. Hence the choice of present and random in my selection from the semiotic square for this chapter, for embodiment manifests itself within the marked body as present, albeit at random.

![Fig. 5.2 Nancy Reynolds Nangeroni, Transgendered logo](image)

I will begin by exploring the differences between transgenderism and transsexuality. In transgenderism gender is supposedly surpassed, while transsexuality apparently exceeds sex, but I want to argue that in both instances the embodied nature of human existence is subtly dislodged and discarded. The strategic and sometimes cleverly obscured position that both transgenderism and transsexuality occupy in relation to new technologies will also be explored. By revealing their generally uncritical alliances with new technologies, some of the disembodied impulses behind these two categories are uncovered.

Transgenderism is described as “the latest umbrella term used to denote people who are ‘differently gendered’ or, literally, ‘cross-gendered’” (Holmes 1999) or those who are “transgressively gendered” (Bornstein 1994:8). There are different levels of understanding and unpacking this relatively new term for, on a broader level, it does indeed refer to the cross-gender community, who want to “transgress the order of gender by flaunting disobedience to the idea that ‘sex’, ‘gender’, and ‘sexuality’ [exist] within a bipolar, heterosexual framework” (Hausman 1995:195). In this broader understanding of the term transgenderism and queer theory overlap, for both discourses endeavour to create a place, albeit a “non-place”, for those who challenge the hegemony of the monolithic heterosexual system. Understood narrowly, transgenderism refers, by contrast, specifically to those subjects who choose not to undergo sex reassignment surgery or undergo the surgery only partially, in other words those who live in the borderlands of the bipolar heterosexual framework. The logo for “transgenderism”, designed by Nancy Nangeroni [Fig. 5.2], clearly shows the state of being at once both male and female.
without being either one or the other. My application of transgenderism, however, cooperates with its impulse to transgress gender by focussing my analysis on the phenomenon of virtual gender-swapping as it occurs in computer-mediated communication. Consequently, I am appropriating the term transgenderism here by narrowing my scope to include only one specific context of its wider popular meaning.

Transsexuality, on the other hand, refers to the physical reconstruction of sex by means of an operation, known as sexual reassignment surgery [lately referred to as gender reassignment (Hausman 1995:3)], in order to re-align sex with what is perceived as the person’s “real” or “correct” gender. Transsexual persons are divided into two broad categories, namely men who change into women (male-to-female transsexuals) and women who change into men (female-to-male transsexuals). Not all transsexual persons undergo reassignment surgery, although they may make use of medication such as hormonal therapy. All transsexuals, nevertheless, share the prevalent “feeling” that they are “trapped” in the “wrong” body (Raymond 1994:6). Medical discourses have accommodated and responded to this sense of being entrapped by classifying and pathologising transsexuals as suffering from “Gender Identity Disorder”.3 The popularity and proliferation of transsexed categories are closely allied with recent advancements in new technologies and discursive practices that promise altered (in)corporeal horizons. The alignment between transsexuality and technology is perhaps also typical of the way in which western cultures prefer to differentiate between sex and gender. As ethnographic studies have shown different cultures dealt differently with the sex-gender polarity. In this regard Unni Wikan (1982) identified the xanith of coastal Oman – biological men living as woman; the berdache amongst the Plains Indians, Tahitian, Brazilian, Aztec and Inca tribes who is described as a “honorary third sex” (Ackroyd 1979:37); Serena Nanda’s (1999) analysis of the transgendered state of the hijra in India and Will Roscoe’s (1992) analysis of the Zuni Indian man-woman. All of these testify to alternative and complex customs through which different societies deal with the sex-gender polarity.

In the discourses of both transgenderism and transsexuality, the prefix “trans” is operative: transgenderism attempts to go beyond gender, and transsexuality tries to transcend sex. Both favour a distinctly disembodied stance, although concealed in many instances, for transgenderism in most of its incarnations assumes that one can swap gender like a piece of clothing, while transsexuality resorts to the surgical correction of the “costume” that is physical sex, to suit the subject’s supposedly more “correct” and “real” gender. The embodied nature of sex and gender, as delineated earlier, with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh and Irigaray’s sensible transcendent, provides no apparent obstacles for transgenderists and transsexuals. In fact, as will be shown in this chapter, embodiment is treated as being predominantly malleable, manageable and controllable – likened to a choice from a drop-down
menu in the case of transgenderism, and a condition that can be described and diagnosed from the pages in medical and psychiatric textbooks in the case of transsexuality.

In my delineation of the two categories, the textuality or textual constructedness, and thus the markedness, of both is important. Transgenderism is textually constructed online in text-based virtual environments, where bodies are virtually marked (re-written) by swapping their genders. Embodiment is re-written or constructed as a virtual text. In other words, bodies come into existence through words typed onto screens. In the case of transsexuality, on the other hand, the physical body is treated as a text that needs reconstruction and realignment. Transsexual bodies are literally re-marked and re-inscribed by changing their physical sex. Transgenderism has virtual markings, whereas transsexuality has “real” physical markings. Although their results may therefore appear to differ, where one is virtual and apparently less damaging, and the other is more corporeal and therefore has more permanent consequences, I am convinced that both categories have major implications for how embodiment is signified in current cyber-debates. Accordingly, the consequences, real and virtual, of both phenomena for embodiment in a virtual age will be exposed. The main thrust of my argument is that going beyond the binary sex and gender system is only tenable and feasible by being in and living through those differences. In terms of the embodiment debate: transgenderism and transsexuality are only plausible if the embodied nature of both sex and gender are taken into account.

5.1 <Transgender> Real sex and virtual gender

In most debates produced on virtual gender-swapping it becomes clear that gender is perceived as being solely socially constructed and therefore, interchangeable, given different social situations and opportunities. Sex, on the other hand, is described as predetermined and accordingly, as unchangeable – a pre-ontological given – except by means of technological intervention in the form of sex reassignment surgery and genetic and reproductive control of sexual identity. Gender, due to its apparent constructedness, and in effect its virtuality, it is commonly argued, is a garment to be worn or slipped off whenever the virtual opportunity arises. The seeming freedom enjoyed by transgressing the limitations posed by one’s own gender is commendable in certain ways. These supposedly bodiless gender experimentations do, however, still have material and embodied effects.

The opposition, superficially incised, between virtual gender and real sex, and therefore also automatically between mind and body, is discernible in most discourses and descriptions on virtual gender-swapping. The following excerpt from Elizabeth L. Lawley’s “Computers and the
communication of gender” clearly shows the attempt to discreetly dislodge gender and sex, making the one malleably virtual and the other rigidly real:

One great allure of computerized communication systems is their ability to allow participants to **effortlessly** reshape their selves and their “appearances” through **manipulation** of words and images – representations – rather than through modification of the physical body [...]. These communication systems allow women to escape boundaries and categories that have in the past constrained their activities and their identities. By providing women with an opportunity to express their ideas in a way that transcends the biological body, this technology gives them the power to redefine themselves outside of the historical categories of “woman”, “other”, or “object”. (1996:5, emphasis added)

Lawley’s tone is almost naive in its expectations; she deploys terminology in phrases such as “effortlessly reshape their selves”, “escape boundaries” and “outside of historical categories”. Although online selves present liberating moments and beckon some freedom for gender experimentation, they also constitute real life implications and obstacles. The future prospects for women attempting to “transcend” their physical bodies by consciously manipulating their gender are however, politically blind, misguided and impotent, in my view. Relinquishing the embodied constituency of one’s political agency may lead into the dead end of inevitable patriarchal sameness (oneness). Elizabeth Reid takes a similarly politically-misguided viewpoint on bodies in computer-mediated communication environments:

How one MUD player ‘looks’ to another player is **entirely** dependent upon information that they choose to give. The boundaries delineated by cultural constructions of the body are both subverted and given free re in virtual environments. **With the body freed from the physical**, it completely enters the realm of symbol. It becomes an entity of pure meaning, but is simultaneously meaningless, stripped of any fixed referent. (1994:2, emphasis added)

In Reid’s text the obvious question is: what happens to the physical body typing in front of the terminal? Should we assume that the physical body with its specific embodied and lived sex, although performative and a continual process, has evaporated and dissolved into the ether? Furthermore, under which circumstances is the virtual body (I presume Reid refers to the virtual body when she states “With the body freed from the physical”) indeed freed from its physical organisation, if ever? Is the physical body not a precondition for the virtual body’s existence? If gender is a mere choice to be made by a dislodged subject (à la the Cartesian mind dislodging itself from the body), how politically productive is gender-swapping for women who are physically situated as disadvantaged and already disempowered before they begin gender-swapping?

It should be emphasised, though, that I am in no way attempting to deny the challenging and provocative possibilities of gender experimentation – online and offline – and its
performative potential. I concur with Judith Butler’s concept of the performativity of gender, which embroiders a richer tapestry of gender categories and tolerances beyond the hegemony of the heterosexual matrix. Nevertheless, Butler also signals the following warning regarding gender performativity: “Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (1991:314, original emphasis). Butler makes it clear that gender cannot be reduced to something that is consciously and willingly elected or chosen, but is rather a process of expression. In other words, Butler’s concept of gender performativity is expressed through an embodied subject and is itself an embodied process.

I am similarly sceptical of a certain trajectory within gender discourses that denies the embodied and situated nature of our existence and lived bodies, by representing gender as a “performance” to be elected by an a priori subject. That line of argument assumes that gender and race, for instance, are essential properties belonging only to the body. Accordingly, it is assumed that if there are no bodies online, automatically there is no gender or race as well. I have argued throughout this study that gender is as much constructed (socially and discursively) as it is processed and embodied by real sexed bodies. In other words, gender is simultaneously constructed and “natural”. Disembodied visions of gender online not only deny the existence of real bodies, but also conveniently forget about the discourses that have created gendered bodies. In forgetting both the reality and the virtuality of sex and gender, such strategies subtly perpetuate the mind/body, gender/sex and man/woman cliff-hanger. I construe virtual gender-swapping as an instance of a drive to dislodge binaries such as gender and sex, by looking first at the different ways in which genders and sexes gender-swap. Then the case of virtual sex and rape and their implications for embodiment are investigated, and finally I outline the embodied and metaphorical cues used online to remind users of a body that is not completely left behind.

Before virtual gender-swapping, also described as “electronic transvestism” (Van Gelder 1991:3) can be explicited, gender-swapping in real life should be demarcated in order to establish some comparisons and differences. The history of “real life” gender-swapping, also referred to as cross-dressing or transvestism, is an intriguing exploration on its own, as Marjorie Garber’s (1992) Vested interests. Cross-dressing and cultural anxiety clearly shows. Garber demonstrates that cross-dressing ranges from initiation rites, during which Zulu men dress as women, to the boy actors of the English Renaissance stage (recently filmed in Shakespeare in Love). Cross-dressing has been physically embodied by celebrated figures such as Joan of Arc, Georges Sand, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf. The cross-dresser has also become a popular cult figure: Ziggy Stardust in the 1970s, Madonna and Michael Jackson in the 1990s are all leading gender-benders or “turncoats of sex” (1993:21), as Baudrillard accurately denotes
them. Two other categories that are closely associated are the drag queen and drag king and the examples of RuPaul [Fig. 5.3] as a drag queen and (Mil)Dred Gerestant [Fig. 5.4] as a drag king, attest to their cultural vibrancy.

Fig. 5.3 Drag queen RuPaul, 2001

Fig. 5.4 Drag king (Mildred) Dred Gerestant, 2000

Circumstantial cross-dressers have made humorous appearances in films such as *Tootsie* (1982, director Sydney Pollack) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993, director Chris Columbus). On a more serious level the cross-dresser has been portrayed in the filmic version of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A biography* (1908), filmed as *Orlando* by director Sally Potter in 1993. In director Neil Jordan’s *The crying game* (1992), the viewer is held in suspense until the shocking revelation of
Dil’s (Jaye Davidson) “real” sex. More recently *Boys don’t cry* (1999, director Kimberly Peirce) [Fig. 5.5] retells the unfortunate story of Teena Brandon, played by Hilary Swank. Teena Brandon, a pre-operative transsexual, under the guise of Brandon Teena, gained the trust and acceptance of his friends until his “true” identity was discovered. The consequences of Brandon Teena’s gender-swapping were brutal rape and a violent death. When the consequences of virtual gender-swapping are explored later on, I will show that, although not as final as physical death, it does in fact also have material outcomes.

![Fig. 5.5 Poster for Boys don’t cry, 1999](image)

The reasons given for cross-dressing in real life range from relief from societal pressures (in the case of male and female transvestites), to putting on a cross-gendered performance for entertainment value, in the case of drag queens and drag kings. In the case of virtual gender-swapping the experiment of enacting the other sex and gender is open to far more participants, owing to online anonymity. The freedom to select a different gender from one’s “real” gender for online experimentation, without the unwanted baggage of revealing true (sex/gender) identity, is very promising and seductive. The reports from the virtual frontier (according to Sherry Turkle and others) also reveal that many find it very rewarding to swap gender virtually, for it opens up possibilities for the self that cannot be enacted in a society that does not generally tolerate more than one sex and gender per person. My brief investigation into virtual gender-swapping will, nevertheless, concentrate on how it impacts on embodiment and how embodiment is constructed in these discourses. In line with my broad argument concerning embodiment, I argue that swapping gender online does have real life consequences, for gender cannot be reduced to a whimsical choice made by a subject. The lived and situated body does not remain unchanged and unscathed during online gender-swapping encounters. Although the dominant
discourses on the subject agree that virtual gender-swapping online is a disembodied
devour, I argue, on the contrary, that it is an embodied activity that spills over into the
materiality of real life. To paraphrase Judith Butler, virtual gender-swapping matters and I am
interested here in how it matters.

5.1.1 Online gender-swapping

One of the first tasks upon entering a text-based virtual environment, such as a MUD or MOO, is
to create an online identity. By providing descriptive information about the virtual character the
user is able to create a “new” and “different” identity for him/herself. As Howard Rheingold,
author of Virtual communities, optimistically asserts: “In MUD-worlds description is the same as
creation” (1993:148). In other words, one is apparently free to create a new self by merely
describing a new self. Furthermore, desires can run wild and uncontained across gender borders
for, as one LambdaMOO player maintains: “We exist in a world of pure communication, where
looks don’t matter and only the best writers get laid” (Woodland 1994). As part of a virtually
created self, choosing an appropriate gender for the “character”, “handle”, or “login”, remains an
important descriptive aspect, if not the most important choice in the creation of a new virtual
identity. Pavel Curtis, creator of the famous LambdaMOO, remarks: “The choice of a player’s
gender is, for some, one of great consequence and forethought; for others (mostly males), it is
simple and without any questions” (1992). Virtual environments, in a truly consumerist manner,
also vary in the range of different gender opportunities that they offer. Some merely offer a
choice of fe/male, while others include the option of a “neuter” gender handle as well. The
elaborate ones, such as GammaMOO, have the following gender choices: neuter, male, female,
either, Spivak, splat, plural, egotistical, royal and 2nd (Kendall 1996:217). Each gender handle
also comes with the correct pronoun, such as it for the “neuter” handle, and s/he and him/her for
the “either” handle. The “Spivak” gender handle suitably uses a set of gender-neutral pronouns
such as e and em, while the “egotistical” handle predictably uses I and me. The continuum of
gender possibilities online improves upon and improvises on the binary gender system that is
available in real life – but only if one believes gender to be a choice that can be selected from a
drop-down menu and is not always already demarcated by embodied parameters.

The fact that gender is the first means by which online characters introduce and
represent themselves in virtual environments (O’Brien 1997) indicates that gender undeniably
matters online. One of the most frequently asked questions online is still “Are you male or
female?” (Kendall 1996:216) or one may answer “neither” where applicable, which still produces
a gender-related answer. The gender-neutral answer is, in spite of everything, produced within
the constraints of the dominant binary gender parameters. In cases where characters evade the
gender question, they are generally not admired for their adventurous gender experimentation, but instead are treated with suspicion, because they are seen to be hiding something. As Jodi O’Brien argues, “The failure to ‘reveal’ gender is viewed with suspicion. These questions underscore rather than erase the significance of gender” (1997). Thus gender politics do not suddenly evaporate into oblivion when individuals are online, but, instead, like a virus, replicate in the virtual domain, with infectious results.

The result of this replication of gender politics into the virtual domain is, mainly, that online gender-swapping cannot be described as a homogenous and equally rewarding endeavour for all the sexes and genders. The located “place” from where the person starts his/her online gender-swapping, their embodied and situated position, plays a major role in how and why a person gender-swaps. For instance, the reasons why biological men and women choose to gender-swap seem to differ greatly. Men’s reasons vary from alleviating the pressure of cultural stereotypes to investigating male and female relationships from another vantage point (Suler 1996). Online gender-swapping may also create the opportunity for men to act consciously or unconsciously on the urge to seduce and be seduced by other men in the role of virtual “females” (McRae 1995) (these include homosexual men interested in seducing “straight” men and men attempting to seduce one another just to prove they can do it). Men may also virtually cross-dress to find out more about “how the other half lives” (Curtis 1992). Online gender-swapping could, therefore, provide men with possible insights of how it “feels” to be a woman.

Most research on the topic of why and how men gender-swap online does, nevertheless, show that when men choose to pose as females online, they do so generally without a hint of bashfulness and in a definite attempt to draw attention to themselves. It is for this reason that Pavel Curtis observes that, when a new character enters a chat room with a name such as “HotFabBabe”, “she” is most certainly a “he”. As Curtis reports: “This is such a widely-noticed phenomenon, in fact, that one is advised by the common wisdom to assume that any flirtatious female-presenting players are, in real life, males” (1992). Does this indicate that masculinity is a privileged position from which online gender-swapping is launched?

If real men posing as females online have no fears about presenting themselves this way, it appears that real women do not want to draw too much obvious attention to themselves as women. On the contrary, most real women feel the urge to hide their “true” gender online, rather than flaunting it. Evidently, most women start their gender-swapping from another situated position in societal constructions and interactions, which in turn leads to a more unobtrusively neutral and “quiet” strategy when they are online. The chances of a real woman posing as “HotFabBabe” are slim and highly unlikely. Pavel Curtis (1993) explains that many female players choose to present themselves using male, neuter, or gender-neutral gender pronouns,
rather than presenting themselves as “female”. Furthermore, evidence shows that female-posing characters receive more technological help and advice than male-playing characters and that this “help” often comes at a price, almost like a man paying the bill after dinner in the expectation that his female date will have sex with him as reward (Bruckman 1993).

Does this information imply that women gender-swap for different reasons and also differently than men do? As already stated, the major difference is that most women need to hide their “true” gender online, rather than flaunting it. If text-based virtual environments provide a space for gender experimentation, why do most women prefer to “hide” their “true” genders rather than “playing” with their gender? Obviously there is a definite difference between hiding one’s gender – or at least attempting to do so – and playing with it by “putting on a performance”. This indicates that, although gender-swapping online proves liberating and even invigorating for the real life gender expectations of some of its users, for others it remains “gender as usual”. In most instances the preconceived ideas and expectations of a specific gender prevail and are, in fact, perpetuated and essentialised in descriptions such as “[...] narrow waist, voluptuous breasts, flowing hair” (McRae 1995) when someone constructs a virtual female character, for instance.

Due to the gender differences in approaching gender-swapping, online resources abound in providing one with the necessary skills and helpful hints of how to unmask a gender impostor. A series of questions that only “real” women would apparently be able to answer are provided by John Suler to assist in detecting specifically a male gender-switcher who plays a virtual female.9 It emerges that approximately as much time is spent online attempting to unveil gender-swapping as the amount of time spent in meticulously creating and maintaining a cross-gendered virtual character. Many users reportedly feel “deceived” when they discover that someone has been posing as another gender, for, as many argue, they like to know where they “stand” (LaPin & Lakshmi 1998).10 In certain respects virtual environments encourage gender experimentation and yet, ironically, many players expect “honest” gender indicators online. Possibly, as John Suler (1996) states: “There is a very thin line between the right to experiment with one’s gender and the violation of the rights of others by deliberately deceiving and manipulating them”.

In this regard Sandy Stone in The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age, relates an interesting "tale of the nets [...] a fable of the loss of innocence” (1998:65) of male psychiatrist (Sanford Lewin), who gender-swapped by accident and then became a huge virtual success as a “female” (Julie Graham). In fact his “female” counterpart had far more social success than his real life anchor. When the psychiatrist decided to come out of his “virtual” closet, however, he met with such resistance that he was ostracised from his virtual community. Similarly, Jodi O’Brien (1997) reports in “Changing the subject” that a woman
who passed successfully as a man on a conference board for several months was threatened with “real, very physical, very painful rape” when the predominant male group discovered her “real” sex and gender. In both these cases virtual gender-swapping had material implications for the two gender-swappers, who had to suffer humiliation and rejections once their real identities were exposed. One can only speculate about the reasons why people react with such indignation and shock when they find that someone has been posing as the other gender online. It may be because gender is still treated as a sacred category that humans should not tamper with and is actually a domain best reserved for the gods and goddesses to explore.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition, on a more complex level, do transvestites and transsexuals (pre- and post-operative) gender-swap online for the same reasons and in the same ways as people in most heterosexual and homosexual categories do? I seriously doubt it. The anonymity of online environments provides transvestites and transsexuals with the added opportunity to cross-dress and experiment virtually, without having to deal with the physical obstacles of “passing”\textsuperscript{12} as the other sex in real life (such as adopting the voice and gestures of the opposite sex, for instance). Passing does, however, still form an important part of online gender-swapping, for the success of a virtual character depends profoundly on how successful the character passes as the other gender. In order to pass convincingly as a specific gender, one has to switch to the “default” perceptions of what it means to be male or female, in other words to the exaggerated descriptions and assumptions of that gender.

The success of the virtual cross-dresser consequently relies heavily on the success of his/her gender performance. The activity of passing virtually is equivalent to putting on a performance. In the case of physically passing as another sex, as in the case of the transsexual and transvestite, appearances are literally put on to make the rite of passage persuasive. Nonetheless, in neither the case of real nor virtual gender-swapping can a disembodied stance be substantiated, for the performance needs to be enacted from “somewhere” and that “somewhere” is always already embodied. The fact that all gender-swapping (both real and virtual) is rooted and embodied entails that it is not a universally neutral and equal process, for each sex and gender begins gender-swapping from a different situatedness. This issue is not always sufficiently recognised and interrogated in discourses on the topic.

5.1.2 Embodied online cues: where virtual gender meets real sex

One of the strongest challenges to proponents of the supposedly disembodied and unfettered state of the online environment, as represented in MUDs and MOOs, is in the heated debate surrounding incidents of virtual rape. Occurrences of virtual rape have finally shattered the utopianism of virtual communities and the virtual domain has lost its pristine innocence,
especially after a much-debated and publicised incident on LambdaMOO. During this incident a character called Mr. Bungle coerced other characters through “the curious notion of rape by voodoo doll” (Dibbell 1998). This entailed the use of a subprogram that attributes actions to other characters that their users did not actually write/type. The coerced characters’ screens were infiltrated with deplorable actions, which they did not “do” or write themselves. Their characters were thus temporarily possessed by Mr. Bungle’s evil obsessions. The significant biological facts became apparent only later, after the case was investigated: Mr. Bungle was male and the coerced characters were female.

I provide some details of the events in order to trace its embodied implications. Julian Dibbell unravels the events as follows:

The facts begin (as they often do) with a time and a place. The time was a Monday night in March, and the place, […] was the living room – which, due largely to the centrality of its location and to a certain warmth of décor, is so invariably packed with chitchatters […]. So strong, indeed, is the sense of convivial common ground invested in the living room that a cruel mind could hardly imagine a better place in which to stage a violation of LambdaMOO communal spirit. And there was cruelty enough lurking in the appearance of Mr. Bungle […] a fat, oelaginous, Bisquick-faced clown dressed in cum-stained harlequin garb […]. They tell us that he commenced his assault entirely unprovoked […]. That he began by using his voodoo doll to force one of the room’s occupants to sexually service him in a variety of more or less conventional ways. […] this victim was exu, a Haitian trickster spirit of indeterminate gender. […] . That exu heaped vicious imprecations on him […] and that he was soon ejected bodily from the room. […] he hid himself […] since the voodoo doll worked just as well at a distance as in proximity. […] he turned his attentions now to Moondreamer, a rather pointedly nondescript female character […] his actions grew progressively violent […] he made exu eat his/her pubic hair […] he caused Moondreamer to violate herself with a piece of kitchen cutlery [while] his distant laughter echoed evilly in the living room […]. That he could not be stopped until at last someone summoned Iggy, a wise and trusted old-timer […] who brought with him a gun […] that didn’t kill but enveloped its target in a cage […]. (1998)

As the account above shows, the infiltration or penetration took place on several different levels. First of all Mr. Bungle overpowered exu and Moondreamer by taking control of their online characters. The virtual character created by a user is something over which the user supposedly has sole control, and the implications for taking control of another user’s online character can be equated to being possessed in real life. Understandably users grow extremely fond and emotionally attached, even “possessive” (Curtis 1992) of their online characters and repossessing a character by impersonating that character is met with great resentment. If a character is “possessed” by another character, as in the case of Mr. Bungle, it obviously has definite emotional ramifications for such a character both in the virtual and real body.
The fact that these two coerced characters had to read the following on their screens: “As if against her will, Moondreamer jabs a steak knife up her ass, causing immense joy. You hear Mr. Bungle laughing evilly in the distance” (Dibbell 1998, emphasis added) obviously caused intense distress and agony. In addition, the two characters had to endure “a brand of degradation all-too-customarily reserved for the embodied female” (Dibbell 1998) and in their case, where both were indeed females, the degradation mounted. The implications of the line “as if against her will”, implying that the character played along and merely play-acted her resistance, doubled the user’s humiliation and agony, and also accentuated the seemingly distanced virtuality of the event in real terms. Clearly these encroaching events had embodied marks and effects, for exu acknowledges that there were tears rolling down her cheek while she read the coerced text. Some may ask why did she not switch off or log off, while indifferently shrugging at the incident’s apparent immateriality. After all, so it is argued, they were merely words on a screen. What is not taken into account is that a “window of pain” occurs between the moment the rape-text starts flowing and the moment a gag shuts it off” (Dibbell 1998, emphasis added). One can only shrug indifferently in the face of that “window of pain” if the link between online activities and real life is denied. In other words, only if the existence of a definite and resilient bond between the virtual self and the real self is denied can one turn away unharmed from virtual rape. The virtual self is always already embodied and even if it pretends to travel incorporeally online, it is embodiment that makes these fantasies of disembodiment possible.

Answering the question whether a rape did take place is a more difficult task, though, for what constitutes rape (real and virtual) depends on one’s definition of the term. Exploring the issue of virtual rape also brings the occurrence of consensual virtual sex or cybersex into play. Virtual sex, also known as TinySex online, consists of two or more consenting players typing descriptions of physical actions, verbal statements and emotional reactions (known as emote) for their characters. Virtual sex can also be described as “speed writing interactive erotica” (Turkle 1996:313). Consensual virtual sex is only one facet of sexual activities online, for the case of Mr. Bungle shows clearly that occurrences of non-consensual sexual activities also transpire in the relative safety of the Internet. Once again the argument of whether rape did indeed occur or not is arrested before the question of whether online interactions can be considered to be only words on a screen.

If rape is defined as “a crime of violence against women, not primarily sexual in nature, and that rapists are not uniquely distinguishable from the category ‘normal men’” (Kramarae & Teichler 1985:382), rape can and has occurred in cyberspace. If one argues that during “real” or “flesh and blood” rape a person’s (usually a woman’s) physical and psychological integrity are violated, the same happens during virtual rape. For how can one be psychologically raped without also
necessarily experiencing the trauma in physical terms? Virtual rape appearing on a computer screen (a “window of pain”) has physical effects – an increase in heartbeat, rising blood pressure, sweating palms and tears. Just as our psyches do not remain untouched by physical rape, how can we argue that our physiques remain untouched during virtual rape? It may be argued that virtual rape at no point threatens the character’s life or material well-being, whereas rape in real life is life-threatening (even apart from the risk of HIV infection). It is clear that virtual rape is not equivalent to “real” rape – it cannot produce blood, bruises and definitely involves no semen. How can one compare tears and outrage with those real bodily evidences of harm? On the other hand, though, how are the physical responses and reactions to virtual rape explained? I do not have the space here to develop the argument further. What can be argued here, though, is that both share the supposition that sex and gender are unequally constructed and embodied in society – real and virtual.

The fact that gender is performed from a situated and located specificity brings to the virtual frontier most of the gender expectations and predicaments as experienced in real life. Although gender is a social construct, it needs to be embodied and performed by biological bodies in order to manifest itself. Between the bio-body and its construction, in other words between the lived and imagined body lies the answer to occurrences of virtual rape and sex. Shannon McRae in “Coming apart at the seams: Sex, text and the virtual body” (1995), develops the notion of a “double-body sense”. She explains that online the “mind/body awareness is not split, but doubled, magnified, intermingled […] the body is entirely real and entirely imagined at the same time”. In other words, it is not meaningful to speak of only minds or bodies online, but rather of a doubling of the two. Online events and interactions take on meaning precisely in this “doubled body” sense, between being-in-the-body and being-in-the-text, in that incarnated chiasmus connecting the two that constitutes embodiment. McRae’s concept of the doubled body partly corresponds with my development of the idea of embodiment, which in turn links with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *flesh* and Luce Irigaray’s idea of the *sensible transcendent*. Embodiment does not solely consist of bodily existence and neither is it a case of mind-over-matter: there is rather, a meshed and inseparable (im)material entity.

### 5.1.3 Meeting in the flesh

It is interesting to investigate the consuming need expressed by most virtual characters to meet in the flesh. To my knowledge, nobody who has conducted an e-mail affair did not also eventually want to meet the anonymous lover. The desire to meet in real life naturally undermines the notion of online anonymity, but it is a risk many are prepared to take, obviously with diverse consequences. In VanessaQ’s humorous *Confessions of a Cybertramp* (1996),
the distinction between cybersex and real sex is blurred as most of her online adventures end in real physical encounters. VanessaQ describes her urge to meet in the flesh as follows: “my only sexual encounters lately had been cybersex. Although they were delightful experiences, I was craving a real, physical relationship. I hoped Winston would provide it for me” (1996:58). The craving to consummate virtual relationships by meeting in real life is a recurring theme amongst virtual characters and also a direct comment on the “doubled body” sense experienced online. Naturally, the outcomes of such physical encounters vary, for other factors come into play in real life than online. The darker side of such a physical meeting is described in one of VanessaQ’s encounters with a certain “Woofie” character, who after having met in real life started to stalk her. This incident once again attests to the real implications of online activities.

Another online relationship with unanticipated results is described by Ellen Ullman, software engineer, who fell in love by e-mail with one of her co-engineers. Ullman plots the fascinating differences and similarities in developing an online relationship, “I fell in love by email. It was as intense as any other falling in love – no, more so [as] Karl and I […] manage[d] to forge a relationship out of this environment designed for information exchange” (1996:12,15). Finally they decided to meet: “It must be done: We will have dinner” (1996:17). The real meeting is overcast by their e-mail communication as they tend to fall into the same conversation pattern of interpolations in real life as they do online. While sitting face-to-face opposite Karl, Ullman realises that they should not have bothered to meet in real life for “we have finally gone out to dinner only to exchange email” (1996:17). This embodied meeting, therefore, resulted in disappointment, and, instead of sparks flying, the real meeting produced what Ullman describes as “body-absent talk” (1996:18). In this specific case the two persons involved were more attracted to one another online than in real life. They had a better relationship online than offline. Yet what they share online is, nevertheless, redolent of embodied interchange. Ullman describes their online connection as follows: “[…] there is the memory of the beach, its feel and smell, mentions of beds and sleep” (1996:19) which are intimacies they could not share in real life. Ullman explains their online attraction as being connected to one another through “the body in the machine” (1996:19, emphasis added). Although referring to another kind of attraction, it also requires embodied metaphors and representations to create a space in which to exist. E-mail affairs also exist in the doubled body sense, as Shannon McRae terms it.

In conclusion, the emphasis placed on the plasticity of gender sponsored by new technologies, such as the text-based environments of MUDs and MOOs, has proved to be highly contentious. On a certain level these supposedly body-free gender-experimentation environments are undeniably conducive to the broadening of gender roles in real life, as long as it is also realised that these changed gender expectations still need real life enactment in order to take effect. Gender’s virtuality is challenged and reminded of its own materiality and fragility
by events such as virtual rape and sex, which threaten to spill over into the real lives of virtual players. Although these events have material ramifications, the majority of popular debates on the topic choose to deny and discursively displace these events. I have shown that a body of evidence is appearing that indicates that the categorisation of gender as virtual and sex as too real run into stark realities, rather than incorporeal horizons. In a similar vein transgenderism meets with the embodiment of its own gender, just as transsexuality meets with the limits of its own sex.

5.2 <Transsexuality> Virtual sex and real gender

One of the first explanations one is bound to come across when exploring transsexuality is how “real” gender is incongruent with the “wrong” sex. Dr. Harry Benjamin (1885-1986) [Fig. 5.6], author of *The transsexual phenomenon* (1966) and medical godfather of transsexuality, as Jean-Martin Charcot stood in relation to hysteria, describes transsexuality as follows:

The transsexual (TS) male or female is deeply unhappy as a member of the sex (or gender) to which he or she was assigned by the anatomical structure of the body, particularly the genitals [...]. For [transsexuals], their sex organs, [...] are disgusting deformities that must be changed by the surgeon’s knife. (ca 1966, 1999)

The erroneous sex is treated as virtual, therefore variable and random, and should be aligned with the “real” or “true” gender of the person. Accordingly, “nature’s” apparent mistake should be rectified by making use of “culture’s” medical technologies. It should be noted that although transsexuals want to rid themselves of incorrectly sexed bodies, the cause of transsexuality is, nevertheless, attributed to the biology of the mother’s womb due to a faulty “hormonal shower” (*The Renaissance Transgender Organisation* 1990), as well as, to the psychological dominance of the mother during the person’s developmental years (Raymond 1994:69). These bodily and psychological “defects” require technological and “therapeutic fathers” (Raymond 1994:69) to remedy “mother nature’s” apparent mistakes. *The Renaissance Transgender Organisation* also describes transsexuality, perhaps unknowingly, in precisely such gendered terms as “a mind that is literally, physically, trapped in a body of the opposite sex” (1990, emphasis added). Hence, in the case of transsexuality, the sexed body, significantly referred to as a “costume” (traditionally associated with women) is constructed as an entrapment, not real, fraudulent and therefore virtual; whereas gender is seen as the true and authentic measure of the person’s identity. In a true Cartesian manner, it is the mind of the transsexual that rules over and decides about the mistakenly sexed body. As the “therapeutic father” of transsexuality, Dr Harry Benjamin, decided
in the 1960s, if the mind cannot be changed to correspond to the body, then the body should be changed to match the mind (The Renaissance Transgender Organisation 1990). For this reason, sex is constructed in most traditional transsexual discourses as virtual and gender as real. The fact that sex reassignment has been substituted by the use of the term “gender reassignment surgery” in recent years, further indicates the emphasis placed on gender as an authentic standard and sex as a secondary and malleable component during the reassignment procedure.

It should be noted that, like virtual gender-swapping, which cannot be interpreted as an integrated and universal event experienced in the same way by all, transsexuality has different strands and “hearts”. In this regard, Sandy Stone, transgender theorist, distinguishes between “traditional transsexualism” and “transgenderist transsexualism” in “The ‘empire’ strikes back: a posttranssexual manifesto” (1994). For most of my discussion, traditional transsexualism will be analysed and, as the argument unfolds, my qualified alliance with transgenderist transsexualism will become apparent.

Even though, I give a critique of traditional transsexualism, transsexuals are faced with an invidious dilemma and often with untimely death due to the fact that the rigid heterosexual two-sex/gender system does not cater for them. The fact that the two-sex/gender system is also an historically recent construction (Laqueur 1987:4) and not a universal phenomenon, as it purports to be, is cleverly disguised in discourses that pathologise and medicalise transsexuality. All the same, to change from one rigid pole of the binary system to the other does not necessarily either solve or challenge the dilemma. It may only perpetuate the rigidity of the system. At this point the reader may criticise me for speaking/writing as a white, dominantly heterosexual female in a rigid binary system that clearly privileges heterosexuality. Although the
criticism is valid, it remains true that the privileged position from which I speak is also a construction on the gender continuum.

In my view, there are no “naturally” and “normally” sexed and gendered bodies, only materially situated and embodied performances of sex and gender. Admittedly some of these performances are naturalised by the dominant discourses, but this is exactly what I am attempting to discourage in my exploration of transsexuality and transgenderism. Accordingly, I am critical of traditional transsexualism in as far as it perpetuates a binary sex and gender system by professing to change faulty “men” into authentic “women” and vice versa.

Taking refuge in technology is less disheartening than the discourses surrounding the construction of the subject as a controlling and deciding agency. These texts uncritically perpetuate the binary logic that they so fiercely purport to resist. Taking control of bodies is only one dimension, for, as I have argued elsewhere, bodies reciprocate and resist such controlling processes. As the obstinate bodies of late nineteenth-century hysterical female patients showed by miming (dis)eases, surgically reassigned bodies also refuse complete technological control by continuously re-writing themselves. I will now explore the bodily remainders that escape the technological intervention of sex reassignment surgery to reveal their embodied consequences.

5.2.1 Transsexual pioneers

Modern transsexuality’s earliest embodied roots can be traced back to Germany in the early twentieth century in the work of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), who coined the terms “transvestites” and “transsexuality” as early as 1910. He also administered the first gender clinic from his Berlin Institut für Sexualwissenschaft. One of Hirschfeld’s clients, although not the first medically-assisted transsexual, Lile Elbe (formerly Einar Wegener) [Figs. 5.7 & 5.8] came
to be known as the first transsexual after her initial operation in 1930. Elbe died the following year due to complications after an ovarian transplant. The first fully-fledged “media transsexual”, however, was incarnated in the sensational sex change of Christine Jorgensen (previously George Jorgensen)20 [Fig. 5.9] in 1953. As captured in the publicity headlines, Jorgensen transformed from a “shy young man with protruding ears” into a “confident woman in mink” (Denny 1998:37).

![Fig. 5.9 Cover story on Christine Jorgensen, He magazine, 1953](image)

Except for these pioneering figures, the category of transsexuality is fairly new, according to Richard Green and John Money (ca 1969, 1998) in Transsexualism and sex reassignment. No recorded examples of physical sex changes are available in historical resources, except perhaps for the enigmatic figure of the eunuch,21 who did not physically change his sex. According to Green and Money, what was called transsexuality in historical texts was in fact cross-dressing or the practice of homosexuality (ca 1969, 1998:3). Transsexuality cannot therefore claim to be a transhistorical category. Instead, as Bernice Hausman (1995:6) indicates, the use and proliferation of transsexuality are closely concurrent with a specific context that has been enabled by techno-medical procedures and discourses developed from the mid-twentieth century onwards. The occurrence of transsexuality, as currently understood, is a fairly recent phenomenon that requires specific techno-medical intervention in order to exist as a separate category from, for instance, transvestism and homosexuality.

Although sex reassignment surgery has, since its pioneering years, become an established medical procedure, not all transsexuals undergo reassignment surgery. These non-operative transsexuals, as they are labelled, may, however, make use of hormonal therapy and other medication to provide the necessary morphological results. This makes the distinction between pre-operative and non-operative transsexuals extremely difficult, since pre-operative
transsexuals also use medication and hormonal therapy in preparation for the reassignment operation. Non-operative transsexuals have, though, decided not to undergo surgery, whereas pre-operative transsexuals are preparing themselves for a series of operations. Moreover, the distinction between non-operative and post-operative transsexuals, on the one hand, and transvestites, on the other, has become arbitrary, according to transvestites. Similarly, the distinctions between born females and males (those born with the “correct” genetic, genital and gonadic material) and post-operative transsexuals are seen by most transgenderists as superfluous and immaterial.

Transsexualism has, however, received a rather unsympathetic reception from most feminist scholars, as Elizabeth Grosz’s sharp distinction between the two embodiments indicates: “The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman” (1994:207, emphasis added). Accordingly, Grosz draws a very distinct line between the experiences of the embodied woman and the embodied transsexual. Although I do not view these different experiences as hierarchically structured, with one more authentic than the other, I do agree that these embodiments differ and that they cannot substitute one another. Another viewpoint put forward by female-to-male transsexual Jason Cromwell (1998:128), is that not all “women” are born in female bodies and neither are all “men” born in male bodies. In other words, according to Cromwell, there is no advantaged or “natural” position from which to access the essential experience of womanhood. Whatever one’s viewpoint, the emergence of the transsexual category has subsequently tangled traditional sex and gender categories almost beyond recognition. Answering questions such as “what is a woman?” and “what is a man?” has become exceedingly complex; no definite answer is possible without building in the nuances of embodied realities as well. The position I take is to acknowledge the constructed nature of both sex and gender, without disregarding the situated specificity of embodiment. Accordingly, becoming a “man” or a “woman” is a never-ending process that is also always embodied.

It has to be reiterated that the short history of transsexualism is intimately entangled with technological and medical developments such as hormonal therapy or endocrinology and reassignment surgery technologies such as vaginoplasty and phalloplasty. The technomedical history of sex reassignment procedures and the growth of the transsexual category are intertwined to such a degree that it is difficult to separate the two meaningfully. It was also in the mid-twentieth century that the term “gender” was created to “manage” the occurrence of both intersexuality and transsexuality within medical discourses. Obviously these discourses struggled to cope with the constructedness of sex and required another level of interpretation to unravel the mystery of transsexuality; hence, the category of gender was created. Gender emerges, thus, as by-product of deviant sexual categories. As argued elsewhere in this study, gender can be read as a technology that constructs and perpetuates certain biases. In the case
of transsexuality, gender positions itself *par excellence* as a technology that incises bodies to suit discomfited minds. Although the so-called inevitability of medical intervention and the pathological status of transsexuality are substantially challenged in current debates on transsexuality, such as Sandy Stone’s “Posttranssexual manifesto” (1994), most discourses on the topic do call on technology uncritically to construct agency.

In its reliance on technology the transsexual community does, for the greater part, privilege the “realness” of gender over the presumed virtuality and malleability of the sexed body. As Claudine Griggs (a male-to-female transsexual) claims: “My body became my enemy at an early age. And since the brain is a more important organ than the penis, it became necessary to change my physiology […]” (1998:10). Once again the rhetoric of the all-pervading brain (mind) dominating the adversarial body rears its head. Transsexual discourses strategically overlook their own blind spot regarding the body, for on the one hand a sexed body is necessary to make the transformation from one sex to the other visible and materialise it; and, on the other hand, the role played by the body is eradicated as the “true being” of the transsexed person resides in his/her gender, which is seen as divorced from the faulty sexed body. In other words, transsexual debates cleverly overstep the fact that a sexed body is nevertheless always required to represent and materialise the transsexed person’s “correct” sex. Both the severed gender and the surgically corrected sex need to be embodied in order to manifest themselves.

This disparity is stretched to its logical extreme by Kate Bornstein [Fig. 5.10], one of the most visible and outspoken transsexual agents, author of the confessional *Gender Outlaw: on men, women and the rest of us* (1994) who argues in a liberal humanist vein that each person has the right to align their deviantly sexed body to their true gender. One may, however, debate the validity of the ontological premises of Bornstein’s demands for the right to change one’s sex. Is the correct sex something that one can demand? Who decides what one’s correct sex is?
Moreover, if gender, which is associated with cultural and societal constructions, psychic consciousness, mind, immateriality and identity, enjoys privilege over sex, which is associated with the material, temporal and the body, do Bornstein’s demands not perpetuate a Cartesian mind/body split? Challenging the gender system and becoming a transgenderist in the fullest sense would however, require more than passing from one “wrong” sex to the other “correct” one. It would require allowing and embracing more than two sexes and genders on the gender continuum and more than one “correct” gender and sex per body. At the same time I would concede that changing sex may be one of the proliferating possibilities on the sex and gender continuum, provided that gender’s supposed superiority over sex is challenged.

Another limitation in most transsexual discourses is the marginalisation and consequent “invisibility of female-to-male transsexuals” (Bolin 1998:64). Apparently, male-to-female transsexuals outnumber female-to-male transsexuals by about one to three and even one to eight, according to other research reports (Raymond 1994:24). Why do more male-to-female transsexuals exist than the other way around? Is it due to the success rate of vaginoplasty and other related medical procedures that turn “men” into “women”, or is it due to the “poor cosmetic results” (Garber 1997:102) of phalloplasty during female-to-male procedures? In this regard Jason Cromwell questions the homocentrism of medical research and procedures that prefer to ignore problems of female sexuality and concentrate instead on transforming men into women (1998:133). If most sex reassignment surgeons were females or female-to-male transsexuals, would the surgical procedures for constructing penises have been more advanced? Is it once again a case of appropriating technologies for homocentric purposes and thereby perpetuating gendered biases? Paradoxically not, for research indicates that female-to-male transsexuals, although outnumbered by far, blend in far more inconspicuously than their transsexed sisters do. Claudine Griggs maintains:

The bodies of female-to-male transsexuals are so effectively altered by hormone therapy that they are supremely confident in their attributions as men. This contrasts with many MTFs, who never escape the fear of being read. (1998:81)

If Griggs is correct in her analysis, female-to-male transsexuals are transformed more unambiguously into men than vice versa and yet they are the under-represented group not only in terms of numbers but also in terms of visibility. The reasons for their under-representation do not necessarily lie in deficient medical procedures: on the contrary, medical intervention in the form of hormonal therapy seems to be quite effective. In fact, it seems that female-to-male transsexuals form a group who seamlessly blend into broader society, while male-to-female transsexuals suffer from not being able to fit in unambiguously. Yet more men choose to become women than the other way around. Could it be because female-to-male transsexuals fit in easier
on a social level, owing to the fact that becoming male is equivalent to adopting the “right” or dominant gender and is subsequently easier to accomplish? Or could it be that becoming a woman is a more difficult task due to women’s alliance with acting and performing?

How does Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” fit into the equation? For indeed if the numbers signify the materiality of “becoming” a woman, then it seems easier to become a woman than a man. One could speculate that one does not become a man, but is rather born one or not (in a correspondence with Freud’s problematic equation of women with lack). As Marjorie Garber explains: “In sex reassignment surgery there remains an implicit privileging of the phallus, a sense that a ‘real one’ can’t be made, but only born” (1997:104). In other words, when applied to becoming women, medical science finds ways to remedy the predicament of not being born female, but changing a person the other way around meets with more resistance. It is conveniently assumed that being born male is an ontological given, while becoming female is a constant process of renewal aided by technological interventions. Maleness is, accordingly, constructed in most transsexual discourses as quintessential and irreproducible and femaleness as artificial and reproducible. The transcendence of sex only becomes operative in the case of male-to-female transsexuals, who supposedly surpass their sexed physicality, while in the case of female-to-male transsexuals the “phallus” is constructed as invincible and therefore as unsurpassable and irreproducible. The luxury of “transcendence” is reserved for certain bodies only.
5.2.2 Rites of passage: to pass or not to pass

In order to pass successfully as the newly acquired sex, transsexuals have to put on convincing appearances, both in real and virtual environments. One of the main subjects for discussion on the online Transgender Forum for 17-23 July 2000, deals precisely with the theme of passing. In this issue an online participant enquires about successful voice transformation: “Voice is probably the toughest thing for a MTF to master. Got any advice?” The logo [Fig. 5.12] displayed at the top of the Transgender Forum, which deals exclusively with male-to-female transsexual problems and issues, in addition, reveals the type of femininity aspired to, which is extremely contrived and simulated – almost a re-embodiment of the screen goddesses of the 1940s and 1950s. The visual message is clear: in order to pass successfully as a woman, one needs to look like the hyper-feminine goddess sitting on the globe.

Fig. 5.12 Logo of the Transgender Forum, 2000

Not only male-to-female transsexuals need to pass: female-to-male transsexuals, although under-represented and even misrepresented must also pass. On the FTM Passing Tips Homepage one is confronted with a list of messages, ranging from advice on “abdominal binders” to “fake stubble” and “adding foreskin on the modified Softie” (FTMPass 2001). All these strategies aim at transforming female-to-male transsexuals into “men”. The requests and advice deal with attempts to fit in and pass inconspicuously as the correct “other” sex. Most of these passing strategies are geared at not being uncovered while attempting to pass, in other words at avoiding being caught out while passing.
The medical procedures that can assist in the transformation process are also not only intended to change the patient’s genital sex, but in fact incorporate a complete physical body makeover – a remarking of the signifiers of the apparently erroneous body. If one browses through the online notes of plastic surgeon Dr Douglas Ousterhout, entitled “Feminization of the Transsexual” (1994), his intentions as an agent of the medical profession become very clear: “My main objective in this surgery is to make you as feminine as possible, in order for you to be as comfortable as possible in your new direction. When the surgery is completed, we want you to be seen as a female.” Besides sex reassignment surgery, hormonal therapy and electrolysis, Ousterhout also offers transformational operations and surgery, including complete forehead reconstruction, for “females tend to have a completely convex skull in all planes” (Ousterhout 1994); chin and cheek bone reconstruction; scalp and brow re-positioning [Fig. 5.13]; thyroid cartilage reduction; breast augmentation; body contouring, such as abdominoplasty and trunk contouring. This set of surgical procedures is extremely expensive and moreover, constitutes drastic technological interventions into the patient’s physical body. The body of the transsexual becomes a cyborgian dream of grafted constructedness, for little remains of the “original” body. Yet these techno-medical interventions do not guarantee a successful passing rite, for – ironically – it is the degree to which these changed attributes are effectively embodied that guarantees successful passing or not. The mere fact that the patient’s physical attributes have been changed is not enough; without the “correct” gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language, the “correct” sex on its own does not secure successful passing. Consequently, even though a transsexual may physically acquire the “correct tools”, the success of transsexuality ironically lies in convincingly putting on appearances and, in fact, in how these newly acquired tools are re-embodied. Addressing this issue, Griggs explains that social pressures do not allow for intermediate sexes, indicating that a transsexual person has to transfigure unambiguously from one sex into the other. Society does make allowances for
gender deviations, such as an “effeminate man” and a “mannish woman” – as long as the individual’s sex is unambiguous. Being “read” in society as belonging to a doubled or cross-wired sex is highly risky for transsexuals. As Griggs elucidates:

In the initial stages, ‘passing’ is of the utmost concern; she is terrified of being read. The resulting interpretation may be that she’s a transsexual, a transvestite, or a drag queen, but that is not essentially important; the emotional consequence lies in the fact that she is not discerned as a woman. (1998:115, emphasis added)

In other words, it is of paramount importance for a transsexual (a male-to-female transsexual in this case) to be correctly “read” in public and therefore, emphasis is placed on appearing as the correct sex rather than necessarily being the correct sex. Undergoing reassignment surgery and altering the body’s sex does not guarantee instant success: the new body’s cues have to be convincingly embodied in order to be “read” correctly. On the other hand, “reading” a person as male or female is no guarantee that the person does indeed belong to that sex. Consequently, “reading” and passing are both highly superficial and contextual activities, even textualised ones and are not necessarily founded on material evidence.

In her text, The transsexual empire: the making of the she-male (1994) (which has been disputed by transgender theorists such as Sandy Stone), Janice Raymond reflects precisely on the superficial nature of transsexuality by emphasising that a transsexual transforms not from “male” to “female” but, according to Raymond, from “male-to-constructed female” and from “female-to-constructed male”. By making this distinction, Raymond uncovers how much transsexuality relies on representations and appearances of sex and gender in order to pass. Moreover, Raymond also reveals the political agency on whose ideas of femininity and femaleness most male-to-female representations are based, as the logo for the Transgender Forum demonstrates. Raymond identifies the originators of transsexualism as “patriarchy and the legions of therapeutic fathers who create transsexuals according to their man-made designs and specifications” (1994:69). Although Raymond’s text is contentious in places, for it assumes that “original” male and female identities do exist, she raises valid issues about the repercussions of transsexuality for feminism(s) in general. Unlike Raymond, I do not find the constructed nature of transsexuality problematic, for in my view both sex and gender are constructions. The problematic question, for me, concerns whose constructions they are and how they are embodied.
In this regard I salute Sandy Stone’s [Fig. 5.14] claims to her rightful position as a transsexual in society without attempting to “pass” as female to console the binary heterosexual sex-gender system. Stone refuses to be silent about her transsexuality; instead, she “reappropriat[es] difference and reclaim[s] the power of the refigured and reinscribed body” (1994:12). Although Stone’s obvious transsexuality may be obnoxious to some, I find it commendable, for she sincerely challenges a system that has identified her as pathological by resisting to blend into “the binary phallocratic founding myth” (1994:11). By refusing to become amicably female Stone exposes the flaws of the heterosexual matrix and the passing parade upheld by transsexuals struggling to become “perfect” men or women, which is a decidedly contingent and contentious mould in any case. Stone phrases this dilemma as an enquiry whether male-to-female transsexuals go from “unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women” (1994:4), which is obviously not the case. The fact that societal gender roles do not permit any “territory between” (1994:4) places too much weight on the end destinations of “man” and “woman”, which cannot be embodied to the full and nor does it fully signify the lived experiences of sex and gender. Does anyone fit the description of being completely and finally male or female? Are we not always, rather, on the way towards becoming male or female, without being completely either one or the other? Are we not always embodied somewhere in-between, while perhaps gravitating more to one sex/gender than to the other?

The tyranny of passing, although discredited by theorists such as Sandy Stone, does, nevertheless, remain a very important aspect of the whole medically-managed process of sex or gender reassignment. Bornstein admits as much: “[Transsexuality] is a matter of juggling cues. **Passing is the whole thing**” (interview with Bell 1995, emphasis added). The accomplishment of passing is literally put to the test when pre-operative transsexuals are required by medical institutions, such as the Gender Identity Clinic of the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Ontario, and the John Hopkins University Gender Identity Clinic, to live for certain periods (up to one year
without hormonal aid and two years in full) as the opposite sex/gender in order to “prove” to the medical society that they are “truly” candidates for reassignment surgery and treatment. This trial period is known in transsexual circles as the “Real life Test (RLT)” (Holmes 1996). The “unreasonability” of the Real life Test can be debated for, as Holmes asserts, “no other medical procedure requires behaviour comparable to the real life test. Is transsexualism really so special as to deserve such a recipe for treatment?” (1996). Furthermore, each pre-operative transsexual also has to undergo several interviews during which his/her so-called authenticity is tested. The sexual preferences and choices of patients are particularly surveyed in order to assure that the so-called “correct” choices regarding sexual partners are made. In the context of heterosexual hegemony and its inherent homophobia, the sexual preferences of pre-operative transsexuals are made to fit into its heterosexual preferences. Ironically, the transsexual community, both pre- and post-operative, are well-informed as to the kinds of questions posed and also the medically “correct” answers to those questions. As Kate Bornstein confesses: “Transsexuality is the only condition for which the therapy is to lie” (1994:62). Not only are transsexuals required sometimes to “lie” in order to be admitted to reassignment treatment programmes, but afterwards they also have to continue “lying” about their previous sexed and gendered history in order to pass as the other sex and gender. The Renaissance Transgender Association interprets this game of deception differently, though:

If there is any fraud involved in being a transsexual, it is the fraud perpetrated by the transsexual before treatment. The person who completes treatment is now the genuine article. He or she has left behind a life of deception and unhappiness. (The Renaissance Transgender Association 1990, emphasis added)

According to The Renaissance Transgender Association, the deception inheres in not undergoing the surgery, for that would require the transsexual to continue lying about who he or she “really” is. The “historical weight of the body” (Zita 1992:126) is seemingly surpassed when the transsexed person unproblematically emerges as “the genuine article”. The fact that post-operative transsexuals may no longer allow their bodies’ past experiences to surface, for example the body’s memories of pain in the case of a male-to-female transsexual, accidents and physical experiences of being male, indicates a state of selective amnesia regarding their own lived bodies’ histories and memories. In this endeavour of actively forgetting the previous histories of the “old” body the lived body shimmers unexpectedly through by resisting its newly inscribed state. One of the main forms of writing back or resistance evident in the historical weight of embodiment is the fact that transsexuals’ chromosomal structure generally remains unchanged. In the case of male-to-female transsexuals, the body remains stubbornly XY chromosomed and does not transform into the longed-for magical XX chromosomes.
Subsequently, the newly-marked body obstinately refuses to be completely managed and does not faithfully signify what is expected of it. *Flesh* incorporates a degree of waywardness that medico-scientific institutions cannot manage and grasp fully. In contrast to the claims of *The Renaissance Transgender Association*, transsexed embodiment promises no authenticity, but rather encounters a sometimes painfully situated body and, at other times, perhaps, a lived *jouissance*.

5.2.3 Putting on appearances again: comparative notes on hysteria and transsexuality

In teasing out the embodied implications of constituting a transsexed body, I want to explore the relations between transsexuality and hysteria, in order to show the discrepancies between the two embodied conditions. The reality of putting on appearances during the transformational rites of transsexuality relates clearly to hysteria’s theatrical impulses to mime dominant fears of femaleness by enacting those suspicions. Just as the hysterical patients mimed appearances under the watchful eyes of late nineteenth-century medical surveillance, similarly (although not precisely) transsexuals need to simulate femaleness and maleness in order to pass. It is not the medical intervention into bodies that turns men into women or vice versa, but, rather, how persuasively appearances are put on.

Hysterical women put on appearances to pass as perfect deviant females, while male-to-female transsexuals put on appearances to pass as perfect “normal” females. Male-to-female transsexuals, for this reason, aspire to become the perfect embodiment of (the artificiality of) femininity by simulating that femininity. Like the hysterical females who did not become madness to the full, but who mimed madness so convincingly that a (dis)ease was diagnosed, male-to-female transsexuals put on female appearances so convincingly that a pathology is identified, which requires medical and institutional assistance. Both hysteria and transsexuality are reciprocated by medical discourses and cannily mirror medical expectations without seamlessly succumbing to its management.

Discrepancies do transpire between the process of the lived body and the abstract and pathologised body created by medical discourses. The transsexual body, as identified by medical descriptions, cannot contain the located experiences of the transsexed body, for there always seems to be an excessive remainder that is not accounted for. Male-to-female transsexual Claudine Griggs acknowledges as much: “Self-endorsement of an altered body has been as difficult as changing it, and on certain days I am reluctant to ‘act’ feminine, because I don’t feel real” (1998:6, emphasis added). Griggs also reveals: “I wanted genital reconstruction to make me ‘not transsexual’. That did not happen” (1998:25). No medical intervention or surgical removal and dislocation can unequivocally warrant “feeling” female or “not transsexual”,
for the body is differently embodied after changing sex than predicted and anticipated by technomedical intercession.

Another aspect that has to be teased out in this brief comparison of hysteria and transsexuality is how both states relate to womanliness as a masquerade. In her classic essay, “Womanliness as a masquerade” (1929), Joan Riviere traces the intertwined relation of womanliness and masquerading, which, according to her are the same thing:

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. (ca 1929, 1986:38, emphasis added)

In my earlier explorations of hysteria and cyberfeminism’s re-appropriation of new technologies, I indicated that femaleness and masquerading are closely interlinked. The same is true of femaleness and technology, where technology is understood as artifice and masquerade. Hysteria can, analogously, be described as a technology that mimes patriarchal medical expectations of deviant femaleness. Similarly – and this is an important distinction – transvestism also simulates femaleness without wanting or attempting to become completely female. As Marjorie Garber explains, drag queens identify the difference between themselves and transsexuals as the difference between masquerading as women and enjoying it, which contradicts the transsexual’s claim to become an authentic woman (1997:355). Transvestism and dragging are activities that are conscious of their simulated state, not attempting to pass as “real” or authentic, while transsexuals endeavour to pass as real women.

Fig. 5.15 Agrado (Antonio San Juan), *All about my mother*, 1999
The apparent authenticity sought by transsexuals is aptly embodied in the filmic monologue of the character Agrado (Antonio San Juan) [Fig. 5.15] in the film All about my mother (Todo Sobre Mi Madre) (1999, director Pedro Almodóvar). Agrado, as her name indicates, is a very agreeable transsexual person, who entertains her audience by disclosing the commitment and costs involved in transforming into an “authentic” woman. As she asserts, “Aside from being pleasant I am also very authentic”. She then provides her audience with a full list of the surgical operations she has undergone in order to become “authentic”, along with the corresponding price in pesetas. She informs the audience that her “almond shaped eyes, 80 thousand, silicone in lips, forehead, cheeks, hips and ass […] the liter costs sixty thousand pesetas […] you add it up, because I stopped counting […] Tits? Two. I’m no monster. Seventy each, but these have been fully depreciated”. Agrado’s reference to her two breasts, which apparently wards off a pending monstrosity, lends itself to some speculation. Agrado claims to be “no monster”, whereas women’s bodies have explicitly been typified as monstrous due to their otherness and therefore, their implicit deviancy. As Marsha Meskimmon asserts: "The word 'monster', and the associated terms 'grotesque' and 'freak', have a special relationship to notions of representation, rational, scientific knowledge (upon which the structure of oppressive binarism is founded) and the body of woman" (1996:7).

In addition, if a monster is an imaginary creature comprising both human and animal parts, the link between woman and monster becomes even more obvious, for both fall outside the scope of male-centered humanness. Therefore, even though Agrado’s embodiment corresponds with the category of the monstrous because of its femaleness, she stubbornly asserts her “normality” and thus her supposedly non-monstrous nature, which bizarrely, according to patriarchal metaphysics, could only connote a male body.33 It is fruitful to compare Agrado’s ironic and parodic non-monstrosity, for instance, with Susan Stryker’s (1994) explicit admission of her own affinity as a transsexual with monstrosity, for they share the same foundations. Both comment on the constructedness of categories such as “authentic” and “natural”. Stryker parodies the alleged monstrosity of her transsexuality by comparing it with the monster in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and, in the process, deconstructs notions of normality and complacency. Stryker aligns herself as “monster” with the “Chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth” (1994:254). As a transsexed “monster”, her identity has been constructed over and against the so-called natural order and, as a result, she has not enjoyed any of the privileges awarded to heterosexual “naturalness”.

Agrado also pays a high price for her not being “natural”, not only economically, but also, if one takes into account the abuse and risk of being found out that she withstands as a prostitute (“working girl”). Nonetheless, Agrado is optimistic about her prospect of becoming a
woman, for, as she concludes: “It cost me a lot to be authentic. But we must not be cheap in regards to the way we look. Because a woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself”. What interests me most in Agrado’s narration is her description of what it means to become a woman and the emphasis placed on authenticity. If womanliness is a masquerade, as Joan Riviere argues, what constitutes an authentic female masquerade? Can one masquerade be more authentic than another? Is the transsexual masquerade of femaleness more authentic than historical or born females’ masquerade of femaleness? I am inclined to disregard authenticity as not being a useful criterion for distinguishing between these different masquerades and would, rather, make reference to differently embodied positions for staging these masquerades.

Agrado’s revelation makes it clear that the representation and reconstruction of womanliness are valued as more authentic than being born a woman, for, as Agrado informs her audience, the more a woman looks like her dream, the more authentic she becomes. In this view, the construction and representation of femaleness are more essential than the materiality of the female body. In other words, being adorned with female sexual organs does not constitute a woman, but putting on the right appearances does. If this is so, why do transsexuals insist on physically changing sex? According to Agrado, womanliness is an acquired facility, which can be reproduced and simulated with more success by means of appearances and looks than the “real” thing (constituting the so-called correct sexual organs, hormonal and chromosomal configurations for a female). Agrado may be correct in her assumption that a transsexual female can appear more “authentic” than a born female, but one must ask who defines “authentic”? Whose ideas about femaleness does Agrado embody?

As in the case of hysteria, femaleness in Agrado’s case becomes a technology that can mime appearances so truthfully that attempting to differentiate it from “real” femaleness becomes absurd. But Agrado’s femaleness, although extremely pleasant and agreeable, or precisely because of its agreeability, serves a different master or object from hysteria’s mimicry. Agrado pleasantly passes as a female according to patriarchal and societal expectations of femaleness (including swaying hips and voluptuous breasts) if one takes Agrado’s (shopping) list of necessary surgical interventions seriously. Hysteria, on the other hand, passes as defiantly female precisely because of its obstinacies and waywardness. It is exactly because the hysterical female dessexualised herself and does not ressexualise herself, as in the case of Agrado’s transsexuality (traditional transsexuality), that she embodies another aspect of femaleness than the transsexual. Hysterical patients dessexualised themselves by upsetting (male) expectations of femaleness and transsexuals ressexualise themselves by entrenching (male) expectations of femaleness. The claim of authenticity also dissipates in the case of
hysteria, for it is precisely an attempt to show that women have been awarded a non-place or an inauthentic place in patriarchal orders. Hysteria is a technology that “authentically” mimes women’s inauthentic place/body as awarded under patriarchy, while transsexuality is a technology that simulates the inauthentic place/body as apparently “authentic”. Accordingly, transsexuals attempt and succeed to an extent in passing as hyper-females, more real than “real” females, outdoing women at their own game of putting on appearances.

It seems that traditional transsexuality takes its simulated femaleness too seriously, but, given its relation to simulation (or the simulacrum) where bodily signifiers are substituted and reassigned, the relation is confirmed. Transsexuality’s hyper-real imitation of femininity reveals the loss of an original femaleness or, rather, it stresses femininity’s incapability (or unwillingness) to be “authentic”. In transsexuality femininity is reduced to a set of signifiers endlessly being replaced and substituted by others. Baudrillard argues in a similar vein:

[...] transsexuality is underpinned by artifice – be it the artifice of actually changing sex or the artifice of the transvestite who plays with the sartorial, morphological or gestural signs of sex. But whether the operation is surgical or semio-urgical, whether it involves organs or signs, we are in any case concerned with replacement parts, and since today the body is fated to become a prosthesis, it is logical enough that our model of sexuality should have become transsexuality [...]. A postmodern pornography, if you will, where sexuality is lost in the theatrical excess of its ambiguity. (1993:20-22)

What makes the transsexual’s simulation of femaleness different from the hysteric’s miming of deviant femaleness is that in the case of the hysteric there is always a difference, a “necessary remainder” (Irigaray 1985a:71), which cannot be appropriated into the rules of “the law of the self-same” (Irigaray 1985a:32). Mimesis only has meaning in interaction with others; the self cannot induce it single-handedly. Mimetic interplay needs the mirror of “the other of the Other” (Irigaray 1985a:303) for its constitution, while simultaneously constituting the other in reciprocity. In the case of the transsexual’s simulated femaleness, the self repeats or meets itself over and over again – as if being cloned obsessively. There is no “true” meeting with the other and the residue of male sameness is eradicated. The hysteric’s mimicry of deviant femaleness contrasts sharply, then, with the transsexual simulation of hyper-femininity, for in the case of hysteria deviance is mimed without becoming it. Hysteria is always something different from what is expected, dancing simultaneously outside and inside the bounds of the symbolic order. The transsexual simulates hyper-femininity in an endless game of self-replication, without leaving a
trace of the other(s). The hysteric has a residual shadow – an outside – whereas the transsexual is entirely comprised of transparent images.

5.3 Going beyond sex and gender

![Image: Dragking](image1)

**Fig. 5.16** Del LaGrace Volcano, *Dragking*, 1997

![Image: Raging bull](image2)

**Fig. 5.17** Sadie Lee, *Raging bull*, oil on canvas, 1994

After sex has been changed and gender swapped, who is in the best position to open up the inhabitable and unnameable places for those who are differently sexed and gendered? Are sex-changers privileged because they have transformed sex, or are experimental virtual gender-swappers the most likely to revolutionise the binary sex and gender system? In my analysis of virtual gender-swapping, it became evident that most (although not all) men transform themselves fearlessly into hyper-gendered females such as “HotFabBabe” online, while in the discussion on transsexuality it emerged that most (although not all) male-to-female transsexuals transform into hyper-sexed women. In both cases women’s sex and gender are simulated to embody male fantasies and desires concerning femaleness and femininity, instead of harbouring the seeds of insurrection for all the sexes and genders involved. In the case of women’s gender-swapping, the drive is towards hiding gender rather than flaunting it and female sex-changers emerge as a category that is not only under-represented in terms of numbers, but also under-theorised.
It is evident that the traditional transsexuals (male-to-female) and virtual gender-swappers do not pass beyond sex and gender, but instead only confirm their indebtedness to binary divisions. In Hausman’s words: “one cannot ‘escape’ gender by switching roles or performances and thereby confuse the binary logic, because that logic defines the possibility of the switching in the first place” (1995:198). Gender is swapped and sex is changed against the backdrop of a binary sex/gender system and the possibilities are always already demarcated. Going beyond sex and gender does not seem to be workable as an embodied option, since every attempt to do so is a response to the sex/gender system. In my view the more truly transgressive figures are those who articulate their differences differently from what is expected in the heterosexual matrix and who do not work with expectations of transcendence. A few of these differently sexed and gendered individuals may include: the drag kings [Fig. 5.16] who parade the supposed “unperformativity” of masculinity; transgenderist transsexuals who live as the other sex without undergoing complete reassignment surgery; female-born individuals who think of themselves as masculine but not necessarily as male or female [Figs. 5.20 & 21]; the witches of Mpumalanga; cyber-sluts; porn stars who turn into performance artists [Fig. 5.18]; femmes; tomboys; masculine heterosexual women; stone butches and soft butches; working mothers; women with beards and bull dykes [Fig. 5.17]. I also include those who have inhabited unnameable sexed and gendered spaces and positions, whether real or/and virtual; those who have an entry into both worlds; those who ‘have it both ways” [Fig. 5.1], and those “borderlanders” who live through their own monstrosities.
In conclusion, in keeping with my overall argument in this thesis, neither sex nor gender is constructed by means of willed acts or “do-it-yourself” enactments that can be forced onto bodies, whether real and/or virtual, by means of new technologies. Gender is not a piece of clothing to be worn whenever the opportunity arises; neither is sex an attentive plastic substance. As Theresa Senft wisely warns those who think of sex and gender in terms of willed agency: “if you do not believe in sex and gender, remember they believe in you” (1996). In other words, to the degree that one “makes” one’s own sex and gender, one is in turn correspondingly being made by sex and gender.

Endnotes:

1 Queer theory presents itself not so much as a new construction of identity, which may be inclusive or exclusive or both, but rather posits itself as a critique of identity itself. In Judith Butler’s terms, queer politics challenges the heterosexual matrix by engaging in “disidentification” (1993:4). The queer strategy of “disidentification” does not lie “outside the magnetic field of identity” (Jagose 1996), but instead remains within identity, albeit a disidentity. Identity politics (heterosexual identity politics) are reconceptualised by means of a queer non-identity or anti-identity, which is always tentative and preliminary.

2 The term “no-place” actually makes reference to the Greek word utopos, (utopia) which is a combination of u (no) + topos (place), hence, no-place.

3 In 1980 the category of “transsexualism” was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the official publication of the American Psychiatric Association, as a disorder. In 1987 the definition of the condition was revised to focus more on the feelings of persistent discomfort and a sense of inappropriateness about one’s assigned sex. From 1994 the term “transsexualism” has been omitted altogether and the term “gender-identity disorder” is now used to cover all conditions in which there is a strong and persistent cross-gender identification (Bullough & Bullough 1998:22).

4 Amongst the main theorists publishing on the topic of gender-swapping online are Leslie R. Shade (1993), “Gender issues in computer networking”; and Amy S. Bruckman (1993), “Gender-swapping on the Internet”; Tomasz Mazur

5 See Timothy Murphy’s (1990) “Reproductive controls and sexual destiny” for an excellent reading of the premises on which the reproductive control that determines sexual identity is based.

6 The word natural is placed in inverted commas because, as argued elsewhere, nature and sex are also texts. Perhaps nature is a text that falls outside and inside the scope and understanding of culture and cultural texts, but, nevertheless, nature is a text that is constantly being written and re-written in her interactions with culture, as the body of the hysteric shows.

7 Robert Stoller (1975) describes transvestism as a heterosexual male who dresses as a woman and is erotically aroused by dressing in women’s clothing. According to Stoller transvestism in women is so rare that it is almost nonexistent (1982:99). Cross-dressing, on the other hand, may be used as a substitute term for transvestism, although it means to dress in the clothes of the opposite sex, regardless of the motivation (Sexual identity and gender identity glossary).

8 Dinitia Smith’s novel The illusionist (1997) is loosely based on the murder case of Teena Brandon, which took place in Humboldt, Nebraska in 1993.

9 See John Suler’s list of ten questions, which are all based in the physicality of women. The questions range from the average sizes for women’s panties, to the negative effect antibiotics may have on a woman. Suler’s article is entitled “Do boys just wanna have fun? Male gender-switching in cyberspace (and how to detect it)”, 1996. Available online at: http://www1.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html

10 Obviously the assumption is made that one can, in contrast to real life, know exactly where one supposedly “stands” with another person regarding sex and gender. As shown in Boys don’t cry, real life can be as “deceptive” as virtual interactions and knowing where one “stands” is in fact a misguided notion.

11 I am particularly referring to feasts held in honour of Dionysus, during which the sexes cross-dressed to celebrate Dionysus’s hybridity and apparently his womanliness (Pollack 1995:10).

12 See, in this regard, Audre Lorde’s description of her attempt as a black lesbian to pass as both white and heterosexual in Zami. A new spelling of my name (1982). Lorde describes how she pretended “that difference did in fact not exist” (1982: 204). In certain places she tried to pass as white, whereas in others she tried to pass as heterosexual, being silenced in the first account on basis of her race and in the second case being marginalized due to her sexual preferences. As she states: “downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black [...] uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a general intruder” (1982:179).

13 For an excellent sociological analysis of cybersex, see Robin B. Hamman’s ‘Cyborgasms. Cybersex amongst multiple-selves and cyborgs in the narrow-bandwidth space of America Online chat rooms’ (1996).

14 I have not conducted formal research on this topic, but I am commenting on my own observations here.

15 VanessaQ is a pseudonym for Sonja Katz.

16 Ullman describes how the e-mail software that they used for their communication allowed for interpolation, which allows the recipient to copy the contents of the received message into the reply and then interject each statement with
a direct answer. I supply the following example from Ullman’s text to show how the interpolation works within the body of an e-mail message:

*[Ullman wrote]* There’s something in this team’s working process that’s really broken.

*[Karl interpolates]* I couldn’t agree more.

The significance of interpolation is that it constitutes a different and new communicative style that flourishes in e-mail interactions, but cannot work in real life due to the immediacy of conversation.

17 The difference between the two phenomena amounts to “traditional transsexualism” adhering closely to medical practices and discourses, subscribing to descriptions and diagnoses of transsexuality, in other words allowing itself to be defined by medical practices, while “transgenderist transsexualism” defies the medical stronghold over transsexuality by living outside its technological interventions and diagnosis and, importantly, by refusing to undergo reassignment surgery.

18 According to D.A. Reitz on her Transsexuality webpage, up to fifty percent of transsexuals never reach the age of thirty. Suicide is not uncommon in their ranks and they are also likely to fall victim to violent and untimely deaths when “found out” by society. The names of deceased transsexuals in the U.S.A., including Brandon Teena, Marcia Johnson and Chanelle Pickett, are circulated in the transsexual community (especially online) to commemorate their deaths at the hands of an intolerant society. See Riki Anne Wilchins’s online poem “No more tears” (1994).

19 The Danish painter Einar Wegener, who underwent part of the sex reassignment surgery, became Lile Elbe. Sadly Elbe died in 1930 after complications in her transformation process caused paralysis of the heart (Hausman 1995:18).

20 Although Christine Jorgensen is not the first successful post-operative transsexual, she was the first to capture the attention and imagination of the media. On her return from Denmark to the United States, Jorgensen’s transformation was published in the headlines. She remained a target of the press and reportedly even after her death her “story” was published and pursued (Denny 1998:40). In 1967 her autobiography was published, entitled Christine Jorgensen: A personal autobiography.

21 If one consults online resources advocating transsexualism and transgenderism, it becomes evident that historical examples attesting to “primitive” physical sex changes did occur, although rarely. The figure of the eunuch cannot be described as typical of transsexualism’s need to change into the other sex, for eunuchs, although “castrated men”, remained in many instances respected and politically powerful figures within their societies (Raymond 1994:105-6). By contrast, transsexuals struggle for acceptance in modern society.

22 Anne Bolin (1998) explains in “Transcending and transgendering” that transvestites view the difference between themselves and transsexuals as a qualitative one, rather than one of degree. Apparently, transvestites view gender-variant identities as much more fluid and plural than most transsexuals do: therefore they do not see the two categories as distinct or static. On the other hand, for transsexuals, any reason not to pursue a complete biological alteration is just an excuse and in fact indicative of their transvestite status (Bolin 1998:72).
Although transsexed women may perceive the difference between themselves and “born” or “full-term” women as not of real consequence, it is an opinion not shared by many born women. In this regard it is interesting to consider the example of Kaley Davis, a transsexed woman who applied for membership to WIT, the women-only online forum of ECHO and was denied access because of her transsexed state (Senft 1997). It is also worth considering the case of Kimberley Nixon that occurred recently. Kimberley, a transsexed woman and rape survivor, applied to become a rape counsellor at the Vancouver Rape Relief centre. Her application was denied on the grounds that she is a transsexual and thus not a “woman” (Holmes 1999).

I use inverted commas when referring to “women” and “men” here to make a clear distinction between the reassessed categories of “women” and “men” inferred here, as opposed to the standardised hegemonic heterosexual categorisation of women and men. In other words, the categories of “women” and “men” are open to re-negotiation and the meanings of what it means to be a ‘woman’ or a “man” are also open to re-evaluation.

Vaginoplasty is the surgical procedure of constructing a vagina. The most common procedure utilises the skin of the penis for the lining of the new vagina and retains a portion of the erogenous tissue from the base of the penis for the clitoris (Hausman 1995:68).

Phalloplasty involves the surgical construction of a penis by means of the tubed pedicle flap (Hausman 1995:67).

Intersexuality refers to persons born with genitals that are neither clearly male nor clearly female and is the term that is now preferred to “hermaphrodite”. “True” intersexed individuals, where both ovarian and testicular tissue are present in either the same gonad or in opposite gonads, accounts for less than 5 percent of all cases of ambiguous genitals (Kessler ca 1990, 1998:242). For the specific role played by the medical profession and the creation and maintenance of these categories, see Alice Domurat Dreger’s Hermaphrodites and the medical invention of sex (1998) and Suzanne J. Kessler’s “The medical construction of gender. Case management of intersexed infants” (1990).

In this regard Bernice Hausman makes a convincing argument against Butler’s use of gender as the creator of sex, by showing that gender is not a transhistorical concept, but, indeed, a term with a very specific history and context for its creation (1995:180-2).

This is one of many contested issues for, depending on which source one consults, the ratio varies.

This is especially true of the chapter entitled “Sappho by surgery: the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist”, in which Raymond challenges the invasion of women’s place, physically and spiritually, by what she terms “transsexually constructed lesbian-feminists” (1994:99). Raymond’s argument that transsexuality should be “morally mandated […] out of existence” (1994:178) is valuable for feminist debates for it challenges patriarchal assumptions about femininity, as well as re-claiming a position for women.

Bernice Hausman (1995:5-6) introduces the case of Agnes, a transsexed woman who deceived the medical institution by convincing them of her “genuine intersexual” state, while in fact she had started to take female hormones in her early adolescence, which gave her a convincing intersexual appearance. Agnes also had to lie about her preference for homosexual intercourse and portrayed an image of complete heterosexuality for her medical inquisitors.

This may be read as an essentialist argument, for it seems to regress to the chromosomal level of the body as measure of identity, where genitals used to be the standard. I wish to stress though, that, neither genitals, gonads nor chromosomes are ever of complete male or female status. The hormonal and gonadal structure of an individual also fluctuates on a continuum of possibilities.

Some masculine females (in slang referred to as “butch”) are also sometimes identified as “bull dykes” (Denny 1998:401). The title of this painting is obviously a pun on the “bull dyke” label.

The witches of the Mpumalanga province come from one of the largest rural areas in South Africa and can be described as fitting into the category of being otherly sexed and gendered. These women are still regularly ostracised and murdered (burnt) by their societies exactly on account of their sex and gender, which immediately make them suspect and labelled as wicked.