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interview: an interview with jan raymond

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an interview with jan raymond

I began my reading of *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* with a full deck of unexamined liberal assumptions: that the concept of a woman trapped in a man's body was not absurd; that transsexualism was at least consistent with feminism if not essential to it; that alleviation of an individual's pain took precedence over all else. Jan Raymond's book prompted the questioning of all these assumptions and raised many fundamental points that I had not considered.

In *The Transsexual Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, \$12.95), Jan Raymond argues that transsexualism is part of a continuum that includes the beauty industry, heterosexist propaganda and economic pressure, foot-binding, genital mutilation, pornography, and other institutions whereby men shape women to conform to their needs and fantasies. Transsexualism carries male molding of women to an audacious extreme. From creating the feminine ideal from native-born women, the experts have moved on to constructing it from male flesh.

The "empire" that develops and grants access to the technology of sex-change consists primarily of the medical/psychiatric establishment. Like all empires, it is administered by men, for the benefit of men. Male-to-constructed-female transsexuals outnumber female-to-constructed-males by a ratio of approximately four to one. The criteria for transsexual surgery include passing as a stereotypical, male-defined feminine woman or masculine man, and the committees who make the decisions are overwhelmingly male in composition. Gender identity clinics at such institutions as Johns Hopkins and UCLA have expanded their clientele to include "pre-transsexual" and "pre-homosexual" children, mostly boys.

Transsexualism has generated acrimonious controversy among feminists and lesbian-feminists, centered around the inevitable "lesbian-feminist transsexuals" who have made appearances in several communities across the country, notably Boston-Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Bay Area around San Francisco, California, where constructed-female Sandy Stone was the sound engineer for Olivia Records until his unexplained departure last year. Jan Raymond's courageous analysis of the issue has earned her angry accusations of insensitivity and lack of compassion for the "gender agony" of individuals who supposedly have no recourse but transsexual surgery.

An essential question that needs to be asked in dealing with these issues is this: Are we ourselves, lesbian-feminists and feminists, "making femaleness cheap"? What makes us accept as a woman a person whose socialization and access to privilege have been those of a man, whose "female genitalia" were created on the operating table, whose female appearance is maintained by regular hormone injections and cosmetic surgery? Every day of our lives, we are subjected to men trying to violate the spaces we have painfully created or claimed for ourselves. The constructed female, particularly the constructed "lesbian-feminist", is the ultimate, man-made violator of our time/space and of our experience as women.

In Chapter V of her book, "Therapy as a Way of Life: Medical Values versus Social Change," Jan Raymond describes the therapeutic ideology, the medical model that stresses "freedom from physical or mental pain or disease; the location of physical or mental problems within the individual or interpersonal context; an approach to human conflicts from a diagnostic and disease perspective to be solved by specialized technical and professional experts." By subscribing to this ideology, which seems on the surface so solicitous of individual well-being, the administrators of the transsexual empire obscure the social/political context of gender-role conflict and relieve our "agony" at the expense of our autonomy.

It might be remembered that the word agony derives from Greek words meaning struggle; gathering; to lead, to celebrate. It is related to the word agent--one who leads, acts, does. Transsexuals and their advocates make much of the transsexual's agony and pain as an individual who does not conform to his/her assigned role. What we, women and lesbians who do not fit our assigned roles, have endured and survived is no picnic either, but through

gathering together, struggling, celebrating, leading, doing, we are managing to create a movement outside patriarchy where "freedom from pain and disease" can mean something more than anaesthesia.

The following interview took place on August 22, 1979, over breakfast in a Newton Centre, Massachusetts, deli. What is published here represents 9 pages edited from a transcript of 27. I take responsibility for the faithfulness of the edited version to the complete one and apologize for the occasional choppiness that the editing has imposed.

-- Susanna J. Sturgis

the interview

Susanna Sturgis: You speak of transsexualism as almost an antithesis of feminism, or a contradiction of it; "undercutting it" was one of the phrases you used. What's your view of feminism and how transsexualism denies it? Jan Raymond: I think that a tendency is to regard transsexuals as breaking down sex roles, because "wow, isn't it mind-blowing that this guy would want to become a woman" dispels the whole masculine stereotype. The point I've made in the book is that most "normal" transsexuals really act out the feminine stereotype par excellence, much more than most feminine women do.

Essentially, what I see transsexualism doing is making femaleness cheap. It isn't just transsexualism; it exists all over. It exists in what women are taught to do to ourselves every day in this culture. But when a man can become a woman, in several surgical strokes, and when women can, even more, accept that man as a woman, then what are we saying about ourselves? What are we saying that femaleness really is? What does that mean about our own sense of ourselves? I think it would be far more honest to say, "Okay, these people have real problems, in terms of not wanting to be who the culture has defined them to be," and I think that transsexualism is at heart not a problem of wanting the opposite body, but of wanting it because of what that body symbolizes in this culture. I think that's the ground to start from, not the immediate idea that "because I feel so discontented, I must be a member of the opposite sex."

I think the absurdity is pointed out by the whole notion of gender identity clinics. Would there ever be seriously taken the notion of a black identity clinic? The problems that black people have would never be put in therapeutic terms; they are recognized as political. But the problems that women, and now men who are so-called transsexuals, have for the most part are categorized as therapeutic and technological, and the technological fix is ready and waiting. SS: The gender identity clinic thing reminds me so much of the experiences women I know have had in just plain old therapy, analysis, or whatever, of having therapists trying to socialize them into the female role. It's not confined to identity clinics by any means. JR: Certainly not. I think what you get in the gender identity clinics is an instrument of institutionalization. You get a consolidation of everything that's going on "ad-hoc-ly" in the culture. It's going on in the schools, and certainly those are instruments of institutionalization too, but I see a real difference there between teaching kids to be really gender-identified and creating flesh that's gender-identified, because there seems to be a point from which you can't go back. The point that I was trying to make about the women [who become constructed males] was that I thought they were the ultimate tokens, in the sense that they had crossed the critical boundary from which I saw little hope of return.

SS: You call them the lost women, the women who are lost to other women.

JR: It's a very complicated question, but I don't think that any of it is helped by doing a liberal analysis of it and saying, "Look at these poor souls, look what they've gone through." People very often ask me, "Can you really believe what you say in the book when you see what these people go through to get the surgery, the pain that they've willing to undertake? Do you really believe

that it's just a question of sexism and sex-role stereotyping?" The answer I usually make to them is, "Well, look what women go through routinely, every day, the terrible things that women are willing to do to their bodies to be beautiful, to reproduce, to constantly be what this culture says a woman should be."

It's interesting, because I have six brothers, and I was the oldest--luckily! I remember a certain point in my life, right around puberty, when menstruation came on, when I really hated my body. When I wished that I were a boy, because up to that point I had been very active and very mobile. But at that point they began to surpass me in lots of ways. I don't think it was just because of the biological aspect; I think it was because of the messages that I was getting very strongly at that point to calm down, to be somebody different. Mixed messages, albeit, but still messages. So I remember really hating my body, and I remember wishing I were a boy.

I think many of us who have obviously found different solutions have at times wished we were boys. I think that transsexuals should also be able to find different solutions. The question that a lot of people will ask me is, "Do you really think that men are capable of finding different solutions?" [laughter] And I have to say, "I think they are capable of finding their own solutions. I don't think that women should have to find it for them." By admitting lesbian-feminist transsexuals into the women's community and by this whole therapeutic mentality, we get ourselves back into the trap of once more taking care of their problems.

SS: You made a really good point in the "Sappho by Surgery" chapter: that maybe a lot of women, including a lot of lesbians and feminists, haven't really examined their own need for male approval, to be included. JR: I've gotten a lot of flak about that. Once you say something like, "There are residues of male-identification and male presence buried in lots of women who think they're woman-identified, who call themselves lesbians," you open a lot of hornets' nests. I really don't think that women want to deal with that. But I think we have to.

SS: In your book, you devoted a whole chapter to criticizing John Money's work. Does that get responded to, now that the book's out?

JR: Most of the reviews will say, if they're going to fault me on anything, "Very good on her scholarship and full of baloney on her feminist philosophy. This book suffers from its radical feminist perspective." But it's interesting that they have to recognize the scholarly work, and most of them will say that that's the best chapter in the book, the work on Money—which I think is the worst chapter in the book. It was written to come to grips with his work because a lot of feminists think that he's the ultimate, in terms of his theory of flexible stereotypes and gender identity as fixed at 18 months. But I don't think they see the ultimate implications of that: if it's fixed at 18 months, then what can you do to change it?

Money has such a credibility in the academic world. I'm amazed that there's been no critical stuff on him. I interviewed him--in fact, I spent three hours with him--at Johns Hopkins a couple of years ago. At the end I was asking him a lot of questions. I get to the point where I have a hard time just being neutral, just staying there and asking people questions and not reacting . . .

SS: Trying to pretend that you think they're giving intelligent answers?

JR: Yeah, and I could probably get more information if I could put my lid on more often, but I couldn't at this point, so I just told him very gently what I thought, what my own analysis was, and he really blew his stack. So I figured that he wouldn't be good for any more information in these circles, I'll have to get it through various other means.

I made the mistake of telling him at the time that I was applying for a grant to do the book--this was about four years ago--from the Rockefeller Foundation. I had been told over the phone that I had it, that it just had to be signed by the vice-president. They pay for

your medical insurance if they give you a grant, so they put me through the medical tests; they never would have paid for [the tests] had they not really been going to give it to me. Then I got a letter about two weeks after this interview with Money, saying that I had not got the grant. I knew a secretary at the Foundation who had been a former student of mine when I taught in New York, so I said, "Now tell me what happened." She said, "Well, John Money called the Foundation in the meantime." She said, "You know, you're a real bozo. You tell this guy what your theory is, he calls the Foundation . . ."--he knew the vice-president who signed the red tape, what's usually just a red-tape procedure, and he said to this guy, "If Jan Raymond gets that grant, she'll destroy everything we're doing at Johns Hopkins." I did not get the grant because of my big mouth.

johns hopkins: no more sex-change surgery

Johns Hopkins Hospital has announced that it will no longer perform sex-change operations, except in the rare cases of individuals possessing ambiguous genitalia. This announcement followed the publication of a study conducted by Dr. Jon K. Meyer, an associate professor of psychiatry and director of the sexual behaviors consultation unit at Johns Hopkins.

Meyer's study compared a group of 24 post-operative transsexuals with a group of 26 who did not undergo surgery. Meyer said, "What we found is that both operated and non-operated transsexuals improved roughly to an equal extent and that, in fact, the non-operated group's improvement was statistically more significant." He added that "surgical intervention has done nothing objective beyond what time and psychotherapy can do" to alleviate the distress of transsexuals.

The study was reported in the Archives of General Psychiatry. Officials at Johns Hopkins Hospital estimate that 25-40 percent of the 100 persons who visit the hospital's sexual behaviors unit want transsexual surgery.

Info from Gay Community News

SS: Did you have a lot of trouble getting the information that you needed?

JR: I didn't, as long as I didn't tell people what my opinion was. In fact, I got a lot of information out of groups and organizations that were funding the research, like the Erickson Foundation. Zelda Suplee² saw me a couple of times. She didn't really know what I was doing, and I always felt mixed about doing that. But I learned a lot after that John Money experience, and I wasn't going to ruin the rest of it. I figured that the place to say it was in the book, which I did. I had trouble when I told various people whom I was working with, let's say, on it as a dissertation, with various theories. There was a lot of resistance. I had trouble getting it published. I had lots of junior editors who read it and thought it was a really great thing. They took it to their board meetings of senior editors and the comments consistently were, "This is off the wall! This is the Anita Bryant of the transsexual movement." That's what some people started to call me.

SS: You had part of it published in *Chrysalis*³--that was last year, two years ago. Was there resistance in the women's magazines, from feminist magazines, to doing it?

JR: The only place I sent it to was *Chrysalis*, and there wasn't any resistance there. I haven't gotten resistance from women's magazines, but I've gotten a lot of resistance in speaking about it in various places, to various women's groups.

SS: In your last chapter, you go into the ethical theory. Would you talk a little bit about that, about the difference between integration and integrity?

JR: I think that people are born with a certain integrity, and we are born with our own resources. What those [integration] models keep encouraging us to do is to think of ourselves as fragmented beings who need all their kinds of external resources to put ourselves back together, whether that be a heterosexual



complementarity or whether it means getting one's shit together in the head by going to doctors who will then take care of the problem through hormones or through surgery or through pills or whatever--that we keep thinking of ourselves as parts all the time. We are whole to begin with, and a part of that means believing in ourselves first and foremost as having the resources. I'm not negating the fact that we all need friends and we all need help in some way at certain crucial times of life.

Transsexualism is a kind of androgyny model. If you can't live out your masculine role, well, then, you must be feminine. But I think there's a falseness in thinking that you actually switch from one to the other, because in my mind both of those are the same. They both represent a poverty of belief and behavior that reduces to the same thing, whether you're talking about the [adism] trip or the M[asochism] trip, which I think masculinity and femininity basically are. You get very mixed messages [from interacting with transsexuals]. On the one hand, you get this ultimate feminine posture, but say something hostile and the masculine zooms right out. Even in physical appearance alone, you know that this is not a woman. Without the constant input of estrogens, those guys would revert back to masculine appearance for the most part. The fragmentedness of it keeps showing itself on both the behavioral and the physical level.

SS: You mentioned a little bit about the reaction that women, not necessarily feminist women, have to transsexuals.

JR: It's been my experience that men, hell, even the Jesuits at Boston College, are so much more accepting of transsexuals than most women. Yeah, well, they're walking around in skirts too! It doesn't even surprise me that men are willing to transsex women into becoming men. Men can afford that; they know that that's another form of tokenism. They know on some level--this isn't all conscious, of course--that those women could be deviant in other ways, and it's much easier to accept a woman who wants to not only derive her identity from a man but become a man than it is to accept a lesbian, who's kind of the archetypal man-hater. A lot of people have found it very strange too that men can even cut off penises of men: how can men do this to other men? Again, I think that's very much explained in terms of the stake that men have in that kind of research.

I think of *The Stepford Wives* in that context. People come out of that movie saying, "Oh, unreal, unreal." I came out of it very paranoid. The plot is basically that this Disney-like figure who makes these robots kills off all the real women and supplants the women with these robots made to have ultimate orgasms, to do everything these guys want them to do, much more so than their wives, who are uppity at times. I think of transsexualism in that way.

I don't want to put it in the sense that it gets so far out that people will say, "Now, hold on!", but I think that the far out is becoming the real. I think that transsexualism is on a continuum of all these other technologies, and at some point we've got to face the mythic dimensions of those technologies.

We've got to face that they do present to us a world-view that explains how expendable women are in all ways.

There are also very practical benefits for the medical community of getting this kind of surgery. Where else could you take out a healthy woman's vagina, or do a penectomy on a man and insert an artificial vagina and be able to study the physiological effects of that? That's why the therapeutic argument, I think, is so important, because if it can be done in the name of therapy, it can be done. Therapy covers a multitude of sins. It's done because you're trying to help these people, rather than for your own research purposes, and the experimental stuff just gets totally put in the background.

SS: How did you get involved with the whole subject? You've been working with it for quite a while now.

JR: I had a very intuitive feeling that that issue went to the heart of the sex-role stereotyping problem, and it enabled me to talk about it in a way where it was very visible. The second thing is that no one seemed to be recognizing all the stuff that was going on about genetic technology, transsexualism, psychosurgery, and all that. Meanwhile, there was growing up a very large academic community in bioethics that was coming out with some horrendous ethical solutions to these problems. There wasn't any serious stuff being done on it, so I guess that's ultimately why I got into it.

SS: What are you working on now?

JR: Two things. I want to do a book on the philosophy of female friendship. I want to look at the idea of friendship, how that is played out among women, why men have said that women can never be friends, what's the ultimate threat in women being friends, past models of female friendship. I want to do something with my convent experience--I was a nun. It was a tremendous experience in terms of being physically with a group of women every hour of the day and never having any men present. We did farming and carpentry together and lots of things that women our age would never have been encouraged to learn, and the friendships that arose there were incredible. But, of course, when most of those women hit *The World* again, they were totally channeled into heterosexuality, and in fact, most of them, if they left, got married right away.

Then I'd also like to do a book on genetic technologies. Most of what has been done on this highlights the therapeutic: "These poor women can't have children and now science comes along and provides a way." I'd like to highlight the immense amount of biomedical manipulation that these women go through in order to have children. I also want to look at the reasons why women want male children, and I want to associate it with the reasons why women prefer men sexually, emotionally, and I want to link it up very much with the institution of heterosexuality.

Those women who are infertile, supposedly, are the test-tube women. The infertility work-ups that they go through before they get to the test-tube work-ups--those women go into those doctors every week and have their tubes blown out. One woman I interviewed was very much into having a kid, but said when she had the therapy, she'd put a towel over her head and cry. And she had it every week. They inject the Fallopian tubes with gas, and they literally just blow them out to see if they can create an opening through which the egg can travel down into the uterus. I'm more interested in doing the one on friendship, but I almost think of that as a luxury, in terms of what's going on with sex-preselection and the test-tubes stuff.

footnotes

1. John Money is Professor of Medical Psychology and Pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, co-author of *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl* and *Sexual Signatures*, and a "foremost publicist of the transsexual phenomenon."
2. Zelda Suplee is director of the Erickson Educational Foundation.
3. Jan Raymond's "Transsexualism: The Ultimate Homage to Sex-Role Power" appeared in *Chrysalis* No. 3. Her extensive reply to the letter of a "feminist transsexual", discussing specifically the role of the transsexual in the women's community, appeared in *Chrysalis* No. 5. *Chrysalis* can be reached at 635 South Westlake Ave., Los Angeles, Calif. 90057.