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Sexuality Without a Name: Mapping Unnameable Desire into Studies of Language and Sexuality

On any given evening at Tranny Chaser, a weekly party at a bar in the West Village of New York City, the crowd will include self-identified drag queens, pre-operative transexuals, male cross-dressers, and others whose gender variant identities have generally come to be encapsulated by the term "transgender" since the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> But the crowd will also consist of a good number of non-cross-dressed men who are erotically drawn to gender variant people, especially male-to-female (MTF) pre-operative transexuals people or, in local terms, trannies. These are, indeed, the "chasers" of the party's name, also called "admirers" in many contexts. In the upstairs lounge, many of these men will pay for lap dances from those patrons who are sex workers. In the main bar, conversations, dances, flirtatious glances, and chance encounters between these men and the transgender-identified patrons – perhaps leading to sex or even long-term romantic attachments – are the very fabric of this party. Some of these men may also frequent places with a more specialized population of transgender-identified people. They may cruise the Meat Market of the far West Village in their cars, willing to pay for sex with the mostly African American and Latina self-identified fem queens; or hang out at a crossdresser bar in the East 20s where primarily white heterosexual<sup>2</sup> cross-dressers socialize.<sup>3</sup>

As such, these men are part of the erotic economy of what has come to be known in the past decade as the "transgender community." By "economy" I mean, at a basic level, the involvement of these men as customers in sex work exchanges and other more informal modes of giving that accompany social and sexual encounters in these settings, such as buying drinks. But more importantly, the qualified phrase "erotic economy" is meant to signify the importance

to these men of the kinds of erotic meanings that arise in such sexual and sexualized encounters. These different meanings of "economy" are hard to separate, since, especially in large cities like New York, the transgender sex market (often referred to by the term "chicks with dicks") is a large one indeed. Newspapers like the *Village Voice* and *New York Press* are replete with personal and commercial advertisements for escort and (implicitly) sexual services provided by transgender-identified MTF people.

In different settings, these men are given different names. "Admirer" or "chaser" are labels usually used by cross-dressers and pre-op transgender-identified women to refer to the men who desire them, whereas in the nearby Meat Market sex work stroll (where the girls more often refer to themselves as fem queens), their male partners will more often be referred to as "dates"<sup>4</sup>. Longer-term relationships may result in admirers or dates becoming boyfriends, and occasionally marriage or committed relationships arise from these encounters. These men, however, are hard to classify or categorize beyond terms such as "admirer." Indeed, what is remarkable about this category is that, in contrast to any other category which marks sexual desire, it does not primarily index a sense of internal identity about the *self* (as for example "gay" or "straight" does), but rather primarily indexes these men's desire for *other* categories of person. It is certainly true that "gay" denotes a desire for a same-sex partner, but in contemporary popular understandings of "identity," to claim to *be* gay indexes an aspect of an inner sense of self in a way that "admirer" does not. Moreover, there is no "admirer community" like a "gay community," one of the key understandings of "identity" itself. These men are mostly isolated individuals who generally don't talk with one another, nor do they really know one another.

While each of these men may indeed *publicly* claim a sexual identity -- as heterosexual or

more rarely, homosexual or bisexual -- their erotic and romantic interactions with transgender-identified feminine people are defined primarily by the admiring itself. As we will see, these men and their partners *both* mount *and* reject “identity” claims but in terms that must necessarily always skirt the naming of this desire *as* identity. To put it another way, these men specifically *reject* an identity *in terms of this desire itself*. So, in terms of their desire for *transgender bodies*, then, these men can be argued to have no “identity” in this sense.

As Foucault (1990[1980]) has so famously shown, sexual identity is a central technology of the modern Western state, a series of discourses and practices whereby individuals are required to render themselves and others through a set of available and discrete discourses of sexual identity which is supposed to tell ourselves and others something fundamental about the self. While much scholarship has been directed at unsettling the assumptions of such identities, few have attended to the theoretical and political significance of those non-transgender people who desire transgender bodies.

In this paper, my goal is to explore what it means not to have an identity, but more importantly, what this “lack of identity” can tell us about the category of “identity” itself -- that is, “identity” as a trope and analytic category for us as scholars of sexuality and language, and not as an experienced being in the world. Clearly, I am not arguing that these men have no “identities” – as men, fathers, husbands, workers, even as heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. Rather, what I intend to explore are the implications of the phenomenon I describe above – that erotic desire, which is generally rendered as an internalized sexual *identity*, can remain unnamed as an identity and how this enables us to open up “identity” itself. The purpose of such an argument is to argue that such a “lack-of-identity” points to some central assumptions about the

categories of sexual identity which carry so much weight in contemporary U.S. culture but it is also intended as an intervention in recent debates in the language and sexuality field. In the waspish debate between Cameron and Kulick (2003), on the one hand, and Bucholtz and Hall (2004) on the other, "identity" has come to be a point of profound disagreement. Cameron and Kulick see it as essentializing and reductive of erotic desire; Bucholtz and Hall see it as a necessary link between sexual subjectivity, a sense of community, and social power relations. These men's lack of an "identity" linked to their desire enables an investigation of some of the ontological underpinnings of what is meant by identity, and how they articulate with contemporary understandings of language and sexuality in ways that, I hope, get beyond this debate. Finally, it also allows us to examine how "identity" is problematically linked to the agency of the modern subject and how admirers open up this central question in the social sciences and humanities. So, while I will be giving some examples of the talk of the men I've introduced above, my goal is to make an argument about the kinds of language we use as scholars to talk *about* them.

"Identity" has historically been understood as a descendent of Enlightenment and Romantic concepts of an internal and essential self. Postmodern critics of this essentialist view argue that identities are, rather, produced in the context of the social, in the day-to-day practice of interaction and that they are "shifting," "multiple" and "fluid". Ethnography of speaking, conversation analysis, and ethnomethodological approaches have, moreover, gotten us to recognize that selves are specifically the product of *discourse* practices. To this, critical discourse analysis and other Foucauldian-inspired approaches have added the ways in which speakers draw on, engage, and contest larger hegemonic discourses about, for example, gender

and sexuality in constructing selves. But drawing on the influential arguments of Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) I want to argue that it is not necessarily that “identity” is the product of such interaction. A key part of my conclusion will be to examine how admirers help us think about two aspects of the relationships among language, sexuality, desire, and identity: first, by looking at how things said by and about admirers contest the notion of “identity” as relevant to their experiences; and second, by asking how these data give us analytic tools for thinking about our own linguistic usages as scholars in using “identity” as a category of analysis more generally.

As such, my goal is absolutely not to go about “making an identity” for admirers, but to see what it is about their self-understandings, subjectivities, desires and what we might call their “erotic projects” that can open up the concept of “identity” in the first place. I am drawing to an extent on Cameron and Kulick here. However, I want to push further than they do in their mobilization of a psychoanalytic understanding of “desire” as an alternative direction for this analysis, and ask: what it is about admirers *specifically* that (a) disable an identitarian understanding of them and (b) what we can then use from this observation to critique the concept of identity more generally *in relationship to scholarly and analytic language itself*. That is, rather than seeing *desire* as an alternative to identity as an analytic framework, I want to use the admirers’ lack of “identity” as a springboard to open up what the stakes of using *identity* are as an analytic trope. To put it another way, rather than a psychoanalytic turn, I want to take a political economic perspective on this desire, not so much in terms of market economies, but rather of the *epistemological* economy of identity and the investments in “identity” that blind us to such desires.

*On Data*

The first thing of interest about these men is not only this "lack of identity" but also the lack of data about them in the scholarly record. It is striking that despite the huge scholarly production about transgender-identified people in the past 15 year, there is an almost total dearth of scholarship or even reference to their sexual and romantic partners (with some exceptions I'll mention shortly). This absence is also evident in my own research: during my ethnographic fieldwork in New York's transgender communities in the late 1990s, I managed to collect virtually no data about these men other than what their transgender-identified partners could tell me. Only on a few occasions was I able to have a conversation with an admirer or a boyfriend, and in those cases the men chose to end the conversation rather abruptly. Anthropologist Daniel Mauk (2008) has recently concluded fieldwork in New York City where he managed to engage in extended interviews with 15 what-he-calls MSTWs (men who have sex with transgender women), but beyond these formal interviews (which took him a year to elicit), he found it as hard as I did to strike up conversations with these men in social settings of bars and clubs.

This is not to say that there are absolutely no data or scholarship about "partners of transexual or transgender people." Indeed, there is a fair bit, but it is very specifically directed and the direction of this literature -- and its tone -- already can give us some clues as to how "identity" among admirers is understood. The majority of this literature, however, comes from clinical and public health literatures and is not about male admirers of cross dressers and transwomen but about the wives or female partners of crossdressing men, or husbands who have come out as transexual women to their wives. Robert Stoller's early account from 1968 described women who marry transvestites variously as malicious male-haters, succorers, or

symbiotes. In Stoller's account, writes Ari Lev, "[t]hese women are described as competitive, angry, and 'inadequate' women who have not only chosen their presumably dysfunctional relationships but may be causally responsible for the cross-dressing behavior of both their husbands and their sons" (2004:273). Other scholars, like Feinbloom (1976), see in such wives masochistic tendencies, co-dependence, low self-esteem, and self-sacrifice. Indeed, a wife's "acceptance" of a husband's cross dressing -- or of a continued commitment to a husband who had come out as transexual -- has routinely been seen in the clinical literature as evidence of pathological identification on the part of *wives*. Any relationship which endured beyond the coming out of the transvestite or transexual husband, Lev reports, was treated in the clinical literature with some bewilderment and not a little hostility.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the clinical literature in the 1990s and early 2000s about partners of transpeople, such as that by Lev (2004), Bockting et al (2007), Emerson and Rosenfeld (1996), Brown and Rounsley (1996), and Zamboni (2006) is characterized by several themes. First, it aims to contest the pathologization of the supportive wives and partners of cross dressing and transexual husbands evident in the work of Stoller, Feinbloom and others. Second, the focus is on relationships more broadly, not only with romantic and married partners and spouses, but also with other family members (children, parents etc.) Third, as the previous point makes clear, most of the focus is on *existing* relationships, that is, relationships in which the transgender-identified person came out to or was discovered to be transgendered by a partner or family member. Finally, most of these accounts deal with family members' and partners' stress as a form of *loss*, and talk about adjustment to the transperson's new self in terms of stages of *grief*.

On top of this, it is also the case that these studies-- and the early clinical literature it

responds to – deal almost entirely with the experiences of *women* who are partners or wives of men who are cross dressers or who came out as transexual women. There is very little if anything written on the experiences of male partners of gay men or of male or female partners of women who come out as cross-gender identified. As with the general focus on femininity in male bodied people more generally in the field, this focus is replicated in the small literature on partners. One of the few books to deal with the partners of female-to-male (FTM) transexuals is Devor's (1997) book where in one chapter he discusses his informants' romantic and sexual relationships and desires. However, here too the primary focus is on existing relationships and negotiations between partners. [NOTE: In this paper, I compound this focus on the partners of MTF transgender-identified individuals for a variety of reasons I don't have time to get into here, but we can revisit this during the Q & A period.]

This picture becomes more complex when we look at cross-cultural examples of men who desire transgendered bodies, where the emphasis is somewhat different. In the work of anthropologists like Tom Boellstorff in Indonesia (2005), Don Kulick in Brazil (1998), and Mark Johnson in the Southern Philippines (1997), the partners of cross-gendered individuals are discussed but references to them are mostly in terms of the organization of the systems of gender and sexuality their cross-gender identified *partners* inhabit. For example, in his study of the Filipino bantut -- a group of male born people who take on feminine roles and who are sexually attracted to men -- Johnson argues that it is at least partly through their sexual relations with masculine-identified men that bantuts define themselves sexually and socially. Kulick similarly argues that the boyfriends of Brazilian travestis are central to the gender identities of his informants. Kulick argues that it is the penetrative role of masculine-identified boyfriends in



anal sex that defines them as men and the travestis as what he calls "not men." Finally, Boellstorff (2005) also discusses the ways in which *waria* (gender variant male-bodied people) in Indonesia understand their sexual subjectivity through relationships with "straight" men who are married.

These cross-cultural examples point to the ways that such groups can be central to the production of gendered and sexual understandings, and, correspondingly, highlights the absence of such individuals in discussions of US transgender-identified or gender variant people. Moreover, it is telling that in all these accounts, once again the ethnographers had little to do with – and very little data – on these men or their understandings of their own sexual subjectivity.

So, whether looking at clinical literature in the US or ethnographic studies cross-culturally, the focus on partners is either on *Western* women who have to deal with their husbands' cross-gender identification or cross dressing; or on the structural role of *non-Western* men in ordering the sexual and gendered meanings of their cross-gender identified partners. There are, thus, virtually no studies of people – men or women, in the West or cross-culturally – who actively eroticize and *seek out* trans-bodied people for sexual and romantic relationships, or which attempt to analyze the forms of subjectivity and desire that underpin such eroticism. This is a remarkable absence. The two exceptions are some accounts in Devor's chapter in *FTM* and Daniel Mauk's recent ethnographic dissertation research alluded to above. In what follows, I will draw on these data and my own ethnography and follow through on the observations I made earlier: why is there such a paucity of research on such individuals?; how does it resonate with the uncertainties about "identity" expressed by and about these men?; and what can this tell us

about sexuality, identity, desire, agency, and the relationship of these to language?

### *At Tranny Chaser*

At Tranny Chaser, it's not always easy to tell who is whom. As Nancy Lamar, president of Cross Dressers International (CDI), a New York City group for cross dressing men, told me, while many of the men who come to Tranny Chaser and CDI parties are seeking sexual and romantic encounters, some of them are themselves "closet" cross dressers and are seeking a way into this practice -- they have not as yet, as Nancy says "come through the looking glass." Daniel Mauk's recent ethnographic work supports this folk analysis in his identification of three primary modes of sexual subjectivity among admirers or, as he calls them "men who have sex with transgender women" or "MSTW." These are, are, first, a "phallus-centric desire," or a desire for sex with a cross dresser or transgender-identified woman; second, a desire for companionship; and third, a desire to cross the gender divide by cross dressing oneself. As Nancy made clear to me, these are also not mutually exclusive kinds of subjectivities or desires. Moreover, they are not easily rendered in terms of the kinds of identity categories that we might ascribe to such desires.

Here I will focus on the first of these three categories, admirers' erotic desire for a feminine sexual partner with a penis. This desire is frequently rendered in public discourse as a form of closeted homosexuality, and an attempt to mask one's homosexuality by seeking sexual experience with a feminine person who nevertheless has a penis.

However, both Mauk's informants and those admirers I spoke to usually explicitly denied a homosexual orientation, homosexual identity, or homosexual desire. Mark, One of Mauk's informants said the following in an interview: "**I don't know why** it's in my mind. And it's

constantly in my mind.... First off, I don't want to be gay. I'd rather stay with women. I like women.... but I also like dick. **I don't know why that is.** Not the guy's [penis]... but if you combine the male and female, it's sorta... it's an erotic balance" (Mauk 2008:118). Another informant, Felipe, echoed the received wisdom about such men when he told Mauk: "A lot of times, if you're a **guy like me**, a lot of people assume that you're gay, and I'm not gay. I'm heterosexual." (ibid:119). Finally, in the same vein, Tim said: "You know, **I can't explain it...** but in terms of homosexuality, I'm not into men, if you understand what I'm saying. That's really not what I'm into... 'Cause I'm telling you, I'm a regular guy – a very straight guy. It's just that I have these **quirks**" (ibid:151). Tim also returned to these normative categories of sexual identity by claiming that he was "predominantly straight but with 20% bi-oriented" (ibid:150). I will return to these statements shortly.

Another aspect that we might conventionally assign to "identity" are the kinds of sexual practices that admirers want to engage in with their MTF partners. While there are men who develop long term relationships with MTF partners, it is a highly commodified field of sexual activity and the parties I attended during my fieldwork and which Mauk also describes are frequently sites of casual and commodified sexual encounters. While the range of sexual practices engaged in such encounters is broad, the one that is most fetishized (and most complex for the transwomen) is the desire of these men to be anally penetrated by a pre-op transgender woman. This is a cause of, simultaneously, humor, distress, and (as I'll talk about in a few minutes) disgust especially on the part of transwomen. In my own interviews with fem queen sex workers, this desire on the part of their male clients was always a strong theme. Admirers' desire to be anally penetrated was complicated both by the fact of the feminizing effects of

estrogen on the MTF body (which reduces the capacity for erection) and the consequences for transgender women's own feminine subjectivities. Hence, a concern for admirers who were seeking anal penetration was the capacity for their fem queen or trans partner to be able to sustain an erection (and, in Mauk's research, the desire for a big penis). In an interview with me, Anita, a 24 year old Puerto-Rican queen who worked the Meat Market stroll of the West Village in the late 1990s, described a common question on the part of clients: "Do you get hard. th- the most thing that you hear, do you get hard, do you cum, that's all you hear all night. Do you get hard? Do you cum?" (Interview, 6/27/97)

What is clear is that these men engage in practices that can be subsumed under conventional categories of sexual identity, and also use these same categories to talk about themselves – gay, heterosexual, bi. But these desires, practices, and statements are always qualified in talk: "I'm.... a very **straight** guy... it's just that I have these **quirks**"; "predominantly **straight** but with 20% **bi**-oriented"; and "I don't want to be **gay**.... I like women.... but I also like dick." In each of these statements, the men position themselves in terms of identity categories, but be it a quirk, a percentage, or a proclivity to "dick." What is more interesting yet, these men also express in their talk ambivalences: "I can't explain it"; "I don't know why that is"; or fail to be able to state an "identity" per se by just referring to the self as "a guy like me."

That is, for all the certainties – "I'm not gay," "I'm predominantly heterosexual," "I like women" – there are also uncertainties – "I don't know," "I can't explain," "I have these quirks". It is in this expressive uncertainty, I would argue, that we can find the most productive analytic stance for thinking about language and sexuality, and the role of "identity" as an analytic trope (and again, not as an experienced being in the world).

These difficulties in naming some kind of admirer "identity" are further shaped by – and shape – the profound stigma that attaches to this desire in contemporary U.S. and European societies. This is most evident in popular cultural representations not of admirer desire itself but of structurally heterosexual men who discover that a female character is in fact a pre-operative transexual. The most visceral example of this is in the truly awful Jim Carrey vehicle, *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*. In the denouement of the film, an entire squadron of uniformed male police officers begin vomiting as the female police chief – and, as it turns out, villainess – is revealed to have a penis. The excessive, visceral response of these men (in unison) to the revelation of a penis on a feminine person speaks not only to the profound cultural distaste for transexuality, but more importantly to the goals of this paper, to the disgust that is culturally required of structurally heterosexual men to the ultimate evidence of masculinity – the penis – on an ostensibly female body. Thus, the idea of desire *for* such a sexed and gendered body is clearly out of cultural bounds, and virtually all of Mauk's informants informed him of the secrecy of their desires and the lengths they went to in order to hide it. It is for this reason, indeed, that both I and Mauk had such a difficult time in getting admirers even to agree to talk to us.

I think also, though it has different gendered implications, this disgust is resonant with the disgust in early clinical work on the "accepting" wife of a cross dresser. As with heterosexual men's necessary rejection of a woman revealed to have a penis, so a woman who accepts – or, even worse, eroticizes – her male partners cross-gender identification must necessarily be rejected as a sign of pathology and a cause for disgust.

The certainties and uncertainties of admirer reports about their self understanding -- and the stigma of having this desire -- are also evident in the talk about partners on the part of MTF

cross dressers, pre-operative transexual women, fem queens, and others with whom I did ethnographic research. What they said about their partners usually depended on the context and what kind of partner we were talking about. For those pre-operative transexual women who had boyfriends or were in committed relationships, usually they insisted upon their male partners' heterosexuality. Indeed, it was central to maintaining a sense of self as a heterosexual woman. On the other hand, Latina and African American fem queen street sex workers whom I talked with about their paying clients, I frequently heard the more common judgement that these men were "really" gay and that they were too closeted to come out of the closet. Frequently, they derided their clients, referring to them as "faggots," especially the ones who desired to be anally penetrated or who wanted to fellate one of the fem queens. Likewise, Mauk also reports that among many of the trans women he worked with (most of whom were engaged in sex work), there is a strong pattern of contempt for admirers, again, especially those who want to be anally penetrated. Mauk writes about the complexity of the subjective experiences for both the admirer and the transexual partner in these encounters: "It seems to me that for a transgender woman, a man who wants to be anally penetrated, or who wants to suck her penis, is automatically assumed to be homosexual, and a homosexual man attracted to a transgender woman casts doubt on the femininity of the transgender woman" (Mauk 2008:183). As one of Mauk's transgender informants told him "my transgender girlfriend wants to be pursued by thousand of straight men, not by men she views as faggots" (ibid).

To summarize, then, admirers are men who desire a kind of sexual and/or romantic encounter with MTF trans-identified people who have male genitalia, and frequently want to be the receptive partner in anal intercourse. These desires are unintelligible in terms of

conventional categories of sexual identity or sexual practice, but those categories are frequently employed – by the men, by their trans partners, and in the popular imagination – to describe them. Most frequently, the men demand a heterosexual identity while the practices they engage in, in particular, the emblematic act of being a receptive partner in anal intercourse – marks them as homosexual. But in the next section of the paper, I want to resist all these analyses and ask: why do admirers, and those who talk about them, feel a need to locate this desire in an identity category? Second, why is that which these men say about themselves and their desires so easily discounted? And third, what can this tell us about the concepts of identity and agency?

### *Analysis*

In their analysis of the use of "identity" in the social sciences and humanities, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) denounce "identity" as a trope. Briefly, they argue that "identity" carries too much analytic weight for its size. On the one hand, it implies an internal, fixed, immutable sense of self and, simultaneously, of belonging to a group. On the other, in postmodern terms, it has become something that is "fluid," "multiple" and "contingent." They point out that, as such, "identity" becomes a nonce category, incapable of doing any of the work that it claims to do because it can mean both too much and too little. Even in constructivist, postmodern accounts, they argue, the everyday sense of "identity" as something fixed and immutable is nonetheless constantly smuggled in, for all its apparent contingency. A second critique of "identity" as a key trope in analytic language is that, they argue, it implies that "identity" is in fact the *outcome* of discursive and social practices engaged in by subjects. They write that the amalgam between constructivist and essentialist positions produced through the varied meanings of "identity": "...reflects the tension between the constructivist language that is

required by academic correctness and the foundationalist or essentialist message that is required if appeals to 'identity' are to be effective in practice. Nor is the solution to be found in a more consistent constructivism: for it is not clear why what is routinely characterized as multiple, fragmented, and fluid should be conceptualized as 'identity' at all" (6).

In these sentiments, we see some of what Cameron and Kulick are after in their critique of identity. But whereas Cameron and Kulick suggest we consider a psychoanalytic perspective in investigating the desires and what I have called erotic projects of sexual subjects, my analytic focus is here, again, the language used by analysts and the seductiveness of "identity" as a category to talk about the talk of our informants and to put this in a framework of a political economy of knowledge.

To return to the questions that I posed at the end of the last section, first I must ask: why do these men feel compelled to talk about themselves in terms of categories of identity such as (usually) an insistence on heterosexuality and a denial of homosexuality? The answer here lies first, I think, in the point that both Cameron and Kulick and Brubaker and Cooper make: that all kinds of things about the self, but perhaps especially sexuality and eroticism, have come to be literally colonized by the trope of identity. That is, the only language that these men have to talk about themselves is that of heterosexuality, homosexuality, or more rarely, bisexuality. It is indeed the imperative *of* identity that requires us -- and them -- to read admirer desire as suppressed homosexual or bisexual desire, or which makes it so hard to understand admirer desire. That is, "identity" as a trope, no matter how multiple, fluid, or situational carries with it the implication of essential and fundamental being and thus produces this effect.

This is thus also a response to my second question: why is it that these men's accounts of



themselves can be so easily discounted? My answer is that it is for the simple reason that they seem unstable, not having a core sense of self, and don't seem to be able to commit to an "identity." Indeed, these men's insistence that they are "really" heterosexual can be discounted as homophobia (or transphobia), even as that same phobia underpins the disgust felt for their desire. In other words, it is our theory of "identity" which comes to have epistemological status as "true" rather than the expressed desires of these men for certain kinds of bodies. This is a remarkable sleight of hand, and I think it is also a reason that there has been hardly any attempt to make sense of admirer desire in the scholarly literature.

I would also suggest that another reason that admirers are isolated individuals, that no "admirer" or "chaser" community has grown up in the way that a lesbian and gay or transgender community has grown up, and that there has been little or no discussion of such desires, is precisely because of the admirer's desire for bodies that are not clearly gendered. As a result, this means that they can have no stable "identity" because their object of desires do not have a culturally recognizable status as stable bodies. Gay and lesbian people have, in the past 30 years, made a case for the recognition of their *identities* as being based on the desire of one culturally intelligibly gendered body for another of the same gender. Likewise, a common discourse in the emerging "transgender" community is that, no matter what one's genitals are, one is either heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual: that is, there is a clear object choice for one gender or another (or both) (though there are certainly exceptions here). While there are crossdressers and transexual women who do desire other crossdressers or transexual women, there is a similar lack of a language to talk about such desires: are they bisexual? Are two crossdressers who have sex together lesbians? Even those engaged in such relationships

struggle to find the words to name these desires.

I would argue that there is no language to talk about such sexual and romantic relationships, precisely because the strictures of the concept of identity and of identity politics still depend on clear-cut gender categories of men and women, even for those people -- transsexual men and women -- who do not necessarily take on or understand themselves through such a binary system. I argue that homosexuals and those identified as transgender have managed the stigma attached to the desire for similarly gendered bodies (in the case of homosexuals) or the desire to occupy a non-ascribed gender position (in the case of transgender-identified people) partly in terms of a reworking of gender in US culture. That is (to cite the key argument from my book, *Imagining Transgender*), gay men, lesbians, and transgender-identified people draw on an emerging model of gender which implies that such desires are acceptable when the desire is for a stable gender -- be it one's own or that of the body which is sexually desired. Indeed, late nineteenth century and twentieth century understandings of homosexuals as "inverts" -- that is, suffering from a gender instability -- has been at least partly replaced in the US by gay and lesbian understandings of personhood in which stable gender identity is the ground of stable sexual identity. And despite the difference and variety ascribed to identities subsumed under "transgender," those discussions of transgender sexuality that do take pace, are understood precisely through the terms of gender-normative sexuality -- either heterosexuality, bisexuality, or homosexuality. Thus, we could argue that the implication of "identity" has *itself* produced the possibilities for a culturally intelligible view of gay men and lesbians, selves that cannot, therefore, be discounted because they have come to be incorporated into a Western cultural script about identity.

This dynamic can be seen in another context too: to return to the standard clinical accounts of wives or partners who support or participate in a husband's crossdressing, the discussion is rarely phrased in terms of the woman's sexual desire *for* such complexly eroticized gender crossing. Once again, such women are routinely referred to as "supportive" or "understanding," which, while this may often be the case, also ignores the possibility that women could be turned on by their husband's crossdressing, and the potentially complex sexual meanings which escape the heterosexual/homosexual binary. It also ignores the fact that women too actively seek out men who cross dress for erotic and affective relationships.

None of these understandings of men's or women's desire for gendered bodies which are not easily categorized in terms of binary gender, gives the desire itself any credence. Because there is no "identity," this desire becomes subsumed under homophobia or forbearance, an understanding which denies both the agency of the desiring person, and -- just as importantly -- the potential desire of the gender variant person who resists an identity simply as "woman" or "man." Indeed the idea of an "admirer" itself implies an outsider status, one who looks on, doesn't participate, and is without agency. To return to the title of this paper, this desire is unnameable because it cannot be rendered as an "identity." But if the desire is there, perhaps there is something about "identity" that needs investigation as a category of analysis itself.

So, what does this (to return to my third question) tell us about the concept of identity and, as I promised in the introduction to the paper, the concept of agency? First of all, it tells us that "identity" is a clumsy tool for talking about the complex ways in which we go about, as human beings, making meaning of ourselves and the world about us. Both Cameron and Kulick and Brubaker and Cooper suggest "*identification*" as one alternative; while both of them

acknowledge the psychoanalytic origins of the term, we can also think of it as an ongoing series of *social practices* in which selves are put on the line, gambles are made, tentative steps are taken as we frame ourselves, our shifting allegiances and desires, with others around us. It is this process, rather than an absolute state of being implied by "identity" which gives us a better idea of the processes by which we come to stake claims and feel investments in particular ways of being. These writers propose other concepts: a sense of groupness, subjectivity, self understanding, self location, commonality, groupness, connectedness. None is perfect, but they escape the implication of essential, internal selfness that is both required, and then demanded if not made evident through already-stable cultural categories of knowing about the other.

Finally, to this analysis I would add that if such a perspective can help us think more subtly about how people go about making meaning in the world, then it can also give us some insights into the concept of "agency," one of the key tropes in our analytic arsenal. Being unable to identify "identity" in the selves of admirers also reduces how we might think of agency. If we think of sexuality and desire in the idiom of identity, then we can only think of agency as the exertion of human action in the goal of *producing* identity in the first place. This is an impoverished and restrictive use of the concept of agency. If, on the other hand, we think of erotic projects delinked from identity (whether in a psychoanalytic or political economic framework), we can think of agency in far more subtle ways: as a set of potentialities, practices, and affiliations, which capture the powerful ways that desires and erotic projects are simultaneously shaped by cultural meanings and generated from individual biographies, histories, and projects.

I want to note that I am not laying the blame at the feet of scholars necessarily – as

Brubaker and Cooper make clear, "identity" is a concept with a deep cultural and historical lineage. But what I am doing here (along with the key scholars I have cited here) is to note how the analytic language of identity can obscure the lived experiences of these men. As a result, we could extrapolate from this to argue that "identity" as a concept probably does something similar in many other circumstances where people negotiate sense of self, locations in space and time, relatedness to others, and more that escape any easy reduction to "identity."

Thus, in thinking about the relationship of language to sexuality, it is imperative not only to think about the ways in which sexuality, desire, or eroticism is produced and expressed *through* language, but, necessarily, to consider the kinds of language we use, as scholars, to talk and write about such objects. It is not just that sexual desire for gender variant people is unimaginable, but that this unimaginable desire is unrepresentable in a system of analysis, theory, and politics which relies on identity categories and which, in turn, rely on two binaries expressed as "identity": those of man/woman and of heterosexuality/homosexuality. In many ways, the admirer is the archetype of desire that queer theory expostulates -- desire outside identity, desire without boundaries. Indeed, desire as a "doing" rather than a "being" in terms of identity categories is precisely that which makes it unrepresentable. Simultaneously, the absence of a recognizable category -- an identity that is -- erases their presence, aided by the ways that scholarly engagements with non-normative genders and sexualities focuses on and becomes constrained by identity categories. I am not necessarily calling for a close study of this particular group -- admirers -- or, God forbid, asking us to create an "identity" movement around them. Rather, I am calling attention to the curious lack of interest to desire which falls outside the realm of the various categories that direct contemporary theory and politics even as we struggle

to escape them; and I am arguing that desires subsumed under the term "admirer" may help us as scholars of sexuality and language to understand desire beyond the binaries of homosexuality and heterosexuality, and beyond "identity."

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**Endnotes**

1. In *Imagining Transgender* (Valentine 2007), I write at length about my use of the term “transgender-identified” and the politics of the category “transgender” itself as a collective term for all gender variant people. In this paper, however, I will use both of these terms without comment.
2. As will become clear, the appellation of "heterosexual" to these men is tentative at best, and itself demonstrates the complexity of using such broad categories of sexual identity to describe people's sexual desires and practices.
3. The vast majority of these encounters take place between non-transgender men and MTF transgender-identified people. Many FTM theorists have pointed to the way that "transgender" is implicitly coded as having an MTF trajectory, thereby erasing FTM experience and desires. However, I have not been able to gather any data on relationships – and especially commodified relationships – among FTMs and those who might be, structurally, a similar category of "admirers." Consequently, when I use "transgender" or "transgender-identified" in this paper, I am referring specifically to MTF-identified transgender persons.
4. For the purposes of this paper, I include all these men under the category of "admirer," though I will discuss differences among them below.
5. In the feminist responses to these accounts (e.g. Woodhouse 1989), it is precisely this clinical disgust of a wife's acceptance of her husband's cross dressing or cross-gender identification that is critically analyzed.