Non-Embodied Embodiment: Transgenderism, Identity and the Internet

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Online, no one can tell that you're a dog. When in the third space of the internet, the body is left behind, allowing people to explore their own identities and to engage in identity tourism with different possible bodies. It is the representations we choose for ourselves online that allow this exploration, the icons and avatars we create that produce embodiment in online environments. Those groups that exist on the fringe of identity, or in a state where identities are in flux, such as: the transgendered community. By examining what embodiment these icons and avatars allow, we can better understand how identity works online.

Unembodied Space: Can I be Whoever I want?

The internet is a space without bodies. People who interact online do so through the portal of a computer, projecting their thoughts through the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to others of whatever communities they care to join. As Sherry Turkle (1995) writes, "When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass" (177). Users do not bring an obvious body with them, and indeed are free to represent themselves as having any gender whatsoever, or no gender at all. This can be done with everything from screen names to fully rendered avatars, in situations ranging from chat rooms to forums to online multiplayer games with literally millions of other users. While unable to fully leave behind the physical body they have outside of cyberspace, people are able to stretch their imaginations and, as much as possible, 'ignore' their physical bodies. It has been said that, online, "bodies and identities alike may lose their connection to terrestrial limits, extending through a new range of possibilities, and in the process may reflect back upon the supposed naturalness, givenness, reification, or territorialisation of real life bodies and identities." (Slater 1). So while the body is not ignored, and in fact is often brought more to the forefront of thought, it is still, in a sense, 'left behind' when the opportunity to extend that identity, to re-embody oneself, presents itself.

Because there is no body in the space of the internet, people are able for the first time to ask questions about their identity. Do they wish to continue with the same identity they have always had, or do they wish to construct something new? Every time they choose a user name, they are, in a sense, embodying themselves, sometimes more then they intend to be. User names can imply bodies, including both gender and age. Users choose everything from gender to (in the case of some games) species, age, nationality, race, religion, and all the details that make them who they are. Marison Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) writes that "While gender and sexual categories and identities are normally conceptualized as based on the biological body, in text-based chat rooms there is no physical space that the bodies of the participants can inhabit" (256). Anytime the CMC is purely text based, the closest a person can have to a body is in the user name they choose, which they must then support with the diction they use when chatting to be accepted as 'legitimate.'

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The term embodiment can mean many things. By embodiment, I mean here the establishment of a virtual body online; the construction of online environment wherein a virtual 'body' is created. T.L. Taylor (1999) writes about embodiment as "the kinds of bodies created and adopted in virtual worlds and the ways digital bodies are intricately tied to life online" (2). So perhaps the bodies online are a legitimate source for identity search, and a proper focus for questions of personal identity. While some (Canny & Poulos, 2000) believe that the lack of haptic sensation, the lack of touch, reduces the effectiveness of this online embodiment, and indeed point out that the non-verbal cues presented by an online avatar are intentional, it seems that even a *reduced effectiveness* of the embodiment does not reduce the issue of there *being* embodiment in online spaces. Embodiment occurs online, to a lesser or greater degree, depending on the situation.

There is little embodiment in text; all that exists is what is typed onto the screen; other situations have much more 'embodiment' available. Unlike the chatrooms, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and MOOs (MUDs, Object-Oriented) of Sherry Turkle's time, there are today possibilities including the addition of a picture or image to a poster's profile, or even the extreme example of the fully rendered avatar, which could be a way that the body is creeping its way back in to a non-embodied environment.

When choosing to post an image, a person can choose a picture of themselves, of someone they wish to be, or of something they enjoy. They can also post images, short animations, and other presentations that while visually significant do not necessarily embody them. These additions can be used to produce further embodiment, but they can also be used to obfuscate embodiment, for example by presenting a non-gendered identity. The online embodiment often appears as a fully rendered avatar, a more distinct virtual body than one would see with text. These avatars form online identities far more extensively than a name or an image does. As Taylor writes, "Avatars and textual bodies facilitate interaction, shape and solidify identity, as well as more generally mediate users engagement with the world" (3). With an avatar, a person online can not only present their identity, but can interact using the body they have created online. They can change the avatar's position, movement, appearance; the avatar is far closer to a real body than Turkle's textual descriptions. Because of this, avatars allow far more freedom in the embodiment process.

With an avatar, a person can create an entire false persona. They may create a body similar to the one they have in real life, or they may decide to go a radically different route. There is nothing to stop a person from creating an avatar that is a different gender, different species, and radically different physical build than the real body. An avatar is restricted only by the program it is created in and the creativity of the person creating it. While online, that avatar in effect becomes their body.

When a body is chosen online, and a person embodies themselves, that body is not permanent. User names can be changed on the fly, avatars can be edited, pictures taken down or replaced; entire new online identities can be established. When talking about the MUDs and MOOs Turkle examines the possibility of multiple identities. These potential multiple identities change the idea of self and of identity. She writes that "When each player can create many virtual characters and participate in many games, the self is not only de-centered but multiplied without limit" (185). This de-centering suggests that it is possible for a single person to have multiple identities online, to be more than one person. These identities may or may not struggle with one another, but it is fair to say that these identities are ways for the users themselves to experiment with identity, to find out who they are by, as it were, becoming multiple people.

Someone moving from a biological gender to a gender that they feel more comfortable in, whether it be male-to-female or female-to-male, has a great deal of identity experimentation they need to do as part of the process. They must learn to act as the gender they are moving to, to speak

like them, etc. They may change their physical bodies, but while changing the body, the mind has already made the change. And one of the only places, early on in the process, they can go to have the embodiment they long for is online, where changing the body is so easy, until such time as the body catches up with the mind. As Patricia Gagne, Richard Tewksbury, Deanna McGaughey (1997) write, "sexually active transgenderists must recognize, tolerate, and learn to accept an alternative gender identity; develop a repertoire of coping strategies to manage public presentations of gender; and, in some cases, manage the actual transformation of permanent identity and anatomy" (482). This alternate gender identity does not form immediately, and the coping strategies must be learned. Identity must be explored, preferably in a safe environment. For the purpose of this paper, I am limiting this exploration to the sexually active transgendered, rather than encompassing the full range of transgender identities.

Before we can discuss these attempts to establish new, different, or changing identities, we need to look at identity itself. Once we have examined, at least in passing, what it means to be who we are, to have a personal identity, we can discuss the question of authenticity in online gender, and finally discuss an online forum (www.tgboards.com) where transgendered people can communicate with one another and both offer and receive assistance in learning those coping strategies and methods of transitioning from one gender to the other.

The purpose of this paper is to examine identity as it is established online, in particular how gender identity is established, and what role it plays in a transgender forum.

Personal Identity: How do I Know Who I am?
The question of what makes us who we are is one that has been bandied about in philosophical circles for as long as those circles have existed. Whether it be Plato's idea that the soul was immortal, separate from the body, and knew everything, making learning only a question of remembering or being reminded of information, as was suggested in the *Meno*, or more contemporary ideas of psychological continuity from Daniel Dennet, the question continues unabated. What we find online is a space where this question can be put to the test, where we can actually find the difference that the body makes, that memory makes, and how actions affect identity. In order to keep this investigation focused, I will examine identity as it exists in philosophical circles, where identity is examined without politics or morality coming into play.

The body is an important part of identity. We perceive the world through our bodies, interact through it, and often identify ourselves via our bodies. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) said that "we may literally say that space itself is known through my body" (167). We understand the world around us through the senses of our bodies, we understand distance and space through our bodies. But clearly not the entire body; there is no crisis of identity when we get a haircut, when we clip our nails, or when we scrape our knees. When discussing transgendered identity, and the online forum of the TGBoards, the body comes under specific scrutiny. The discussion may be about the biological body, or the body as it presents to the general world, or the body as it presented online, by way of names, images, and pictures.

Rene Descartes (1641) wrote that "I have a body with which I am very closely united ...a distinct idea of a body in so far as it is only an extended being which does not think, it is certain that this "I" –that is to say, my soul, by virtue of which I am what I am—is entirely and truly distinct from my body and that *it can be or exist without it*" (LaFleur 74, my emphasis). He says that the body is distinct and separate from what he is. If this is true, then the gender of the mind is more important than the gender of the body. Transgendered persons who want their bodies to match their minds support this. Descartes suggested a distinction between the body and the mind. This would suggest that with a different body, so long as the mind remained the same, it would be the same person.

This is a hotly contested notion. Daniel Dennett (1997) writes that "One cannot tear me apart from my body leaving a nice clean edge … My body contains as much of me, the values and talents and memories and dispositions that make me who I am, as my nervous system does" (77), suggesting that the body plays a significant role in identity, and suggesting that there is not an easy way to separate the mind from the body. So, while John Canny and Eric Paulos (2000) write that "cyberspace has been built on Cartesian ideals of a metaphysical separation between mind and body: When we enter cyberspace, even a 3D world, it is the "mind" that enters. It may be regaled with an exotic 3D form, but such a form is an avatar only of the mind. The body stays outside, Dennet suggests that this is not so; the body *cannot* be left behind.

The way people have used internet spaces, however, seems to disagree with Dennet. Online, we can have any 'body' we want. The closest thing to a body we have online is a user name, or in some cases a name and a picture to represent how we want to project ourselves to look, such as "tara giles"[1] did; either way, it is something we create at our discretion. We exist online as minds, not as bodies, though we are aware that those minds are, somewhere, attached to bodies. Yes, the body contains within its structures the memories that make us who we are. The body holds the scars that mark our experiences, the coordination that comes with practice, and the brain that hold the memories themselves. Online, we have no visible physical scars, our coordination is purely a matter of mental agility, and the memory online is kept in the transcripts of conversations or forum posts. In order to fully investigate the creation of this online embodiment, some notions of gender and the body must be ignored. The body, as it were, must be left behind.

Of course, we do not actually leave our bodies behind when we go online. We remain in our bodies, separating only in a metaphorical sense, our minds 'leaving our bodies behind' though we remain sitting at the computer screen. This metaphorical talk follows Descartes' ideas of a separate mind from the body, suggesting that it should be possible to break away from our actual bodies and form online bodies.

Doing that, however, would require that we have the experience of multiple bodies simultaneously. Our 'online' body and our 'real' body would be having similar experiences, but not identical ones: the online would be 'experiencing' things, and the real would be reading about or viewing those things. The Avatar – by which I mean the complete online body – such as the avatars of characters in World of Warcraft, is an online body that experiences things that the 'real' body only views. Since the same mind occupies both bodies, that would mean that it is having multiple simultaneous experiences. This seems to be counterintuitive, the idea of having multiple experiences simultaneously. Derek Parfitt (1987) tells us that such a thing isn't impossible; having multiple experience is not strange; it's actually quite common. He writes that:

> It is simply a fact that ordinary people are, at any time, aware of having several different experiences… Just as there can be a single memory of just have had several experiences, such as hearing a bell strike three times, there can be a single state of awareness both of hearing the fourth striking of this bell, and of seeing, at the same time, ravens flying past the bell-tower … In claiming that there are two such states of awareness, we are not postulating the existence of unfamiliar entities, two separately existing Egos which are not the same as the single person whom the case involves. (*Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons,* 25)

Suggesting that we frequently have the experience of multiple things at the same time. Parfitt is suggesting the combined experience of vision with hearing, but the analogy can be expanded to include the 'sense' of the imagined, which more or less is what online bodies are. We do not actually see through those bodies, feel those bodies, or move those bodies. We only imagine that we do, implanting ourselves into those virtual bodies by way of our imagination.

Is the imagination a valid way to see identities? That is, can we safely say that identity can be determined in relation to online bodies? Sherry Turkle seems to believe that we can. She wrote that "Now, in postmodern times, multiple identities are no longer so much at the margins of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated" (180). It is important to note that Turkle was writing in the 1990s, when the world of the internet was more novel but far less flexible than it is today. Things have changed online in that time; we are no longer limited to the body as "represented by one's own textual description, so the obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the 'nerdy' sophisticated" (12). Now we have actual avatars, 'real' (though sometimes anatomically impossible) bodies that can be constructed online in visuals rather than just in text. Turkle was limited to pure text, and so her insights are very helpful in those cases, but the modern internet allows pictures, images, and even fully rendered avatars to represent the body online.

And it does seem that we are able to negotiate these multiple identities, that we can see ourselves as the characters we create online without qualifying as having a form of mental disorder. This is not to suggest mental instability; I am not suggesting that people *actually* believe that they are multiple people; nonetheless, the characters online become real in the sense that they do represent the user, and they do allow the user to experience a multivalence of identity.

This ability to alter, switch, or remove identity markers from the real world while online leads to a number of interesting situations. Andre Brock (2009) writes that "The paradox of constructing and embodied identity in a virtual space helps to open up an ontological consideration of racial identity – that it is a socially constructed artifact with more to do with social and cultural resources than with skin color" (32). Whether someone is white or black cannot be determined through the filter, the looking glass, of the internet world. Racial identity, like any other group membership, requires more than simply being a member of said group by a chance of birth, social status, etc. Without the 'real' bodies having position online, people must provide legitimacy to what they claim to be. They must prove that they are what they say they are. Brock tells us that "The removal of physical signifiers of race from credible online articulations of racial identity highlights that race has always been more about the relation of the sign (locating differences in others) to the signifier (rationales for maintaining social structures) than it is to any particular physiognomic aspect" (32). This suggests that racial identity is based on how a person is identified by others, rather than how they identify themselves. So racial membership becomes a case of locating differences, rather than noting similarities. That is, online you cannot see who is black and who is white. But when someone communicates in a way that suggests "black-ness," "hispanic-ness," "white-ness," or any other group, they do so by displaying their differences from other groups rather than their similarities with their own community. One is "white" online only by virtue of *not* being "black," "hispanic," "middle-eastern," or any other group. When a person presents as well educated, they do so by *not* making grammar mistakes, by *not* misusing vocabulary; while it can be said that they *are* using bigger words or correct grammar, it seems that the identity is created and accepted more by virtue of what is not done than by what is.

Were one wanting to present a different identity, they could do so, but only if they were able to provide the legitimacy cues that proved they were part of the group they claim to be. This legitimacy issue is important no matter what identities are adapted online. In fact, the more radical the identity shift from the 'real' identity, the more legitimacy needs to be proven. We will see this come into play later. First, though, we must discuss gender identity.

The significance of this ability to create and adapt new identities, new online 'bodies' is nowhere more important than in the case of gender identity. If a man wants to be a woman in the real world, he must, as Turkle suggests, shave various parts of his body, wear makeup, different

clothing, different hair, different shoes; he must walk differently, talk differently, and have different mannerisms if he wants even a chance at 'passing'; online, swapping gender is as easy as clicking the "female" box instead of the "male" box (Turkle 212); at least, this is how easy it is to begin; the legitimacy question still comes into play, as we saw from the non-physical ways of making difference above. Nevertheless, it is far easier, and far less risky, to swap genders online. It is also less time consuming and less likely to result in physical violence. These factors together make it more attractive to experiment with different gender identities, and different identities in general. While the legitimation still needs to occur, if someone fails to prove their legitimacy online, they face non-physical violence in the form of shunning and potentially insulting messages; far easier to handle and easier to risk than the potential of physical violence that exists in similar situations in the real world.

Authenticity Online: How Can I Convince People I am Who I Say I am?
Part of any identity is membership in a group. Choosing to take up an identity as part of a group that a person was not born and raised into is very difficult. From the beginning of any experience online, there are qualifications necessary for being considered and accepted as part of a group. In order to be accepted as part of a group, you need to know the lingo, have an idea of the shared history, and be 'in the know' as to the way that community operates. It is very similar to the discourse communities in academia. As Kenneth Bruffee (1984) wrote, "Mastery of a knowledge community's normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community" (424). While he was discussing academic communities, such as the community of literary scholars, of physicists, or of lawyers, his argument extends to the online world, to the communities that form in cyberspace. Those communities have their own methods of discourse, types of conversation that are frowned upon as well as those that are widely accepted. There is this kind of community among genders as well; certain activities are considered 'manly' or 'womanly,' 'ladylike,' 'boyish,' etc. In order to be considered a 'manly man,' a person must prove that they are part of that community: they must use the right vocabulary, talk about the right topics; they must 'walk the walk' so to speak. Frequently, a transgendered person tries to be part of a 'community' of male-ness and female-ness, which we see when Gagne et. al. write "the overwhelming majority of transgendered individuals adhere to traditional conceptualizations of sex and gender" (504). They adhere to these traditional conceptualizations so that they can become a part of the community that they have always felt like they should be a part of, regardless of the 'mistakes' of biology. Knowing how to talk in a community is a vital part of becoming part of that community, of 'passing' as a member. Just as David Batholomae (1986) wrote that "the student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (623), so too does the transgendered individual need to learn to speak the language of their non-biological gender; they must learn how their new gender learns, how they act, and how the community as a whole responds, so that they can be a part of this. This is a limited view of transgenderism; not every transgendered person wants to change their bodies, or wants to change it entirely. Some aim for androgyny, a lack of gender altogether. But for the purpose of this investigation, I am limited to those transgendered persons who *do* fall into the category of wanting to change completely to a new gender.

Again, doing such things online is far easier than it is in real life (IRL). It is easier to create an identity online, because "The absence of visual and aural cues downplays participants' biological bodies, and thus greatly reduces the amount of personal information available in the interactions" (Del-Teso-Craviotto 251). Online, a woman doesn't have to speak with a deeper voice, or bind her chest. She does not need to get a 'manly' hair cut in order to pass as a man. Those cues, the

movements, gestures, and expressions that help us identify one another in the real world, do not exist online. Daante Djerks, Arjan E.R. Bos and Jasper von Grumbkow (2008) point out that "A specific characteristic of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is that it is largely text-based, which automatically implicates that there is a lack of nonverbal cues" (379). Those nonverbal cues are often used to present authenticity to identity and gender; this is one reason why a transgendered person must live for a time as their new gender before the gender reassignment surgery is done: they must learn the nonverbal cues. Del-Teso-Craviotto writes that "...the authentication of a participants' gender and sexual identity is a performative act achieved through different linguistic strategies" (256). Everything is based on linguistic strategies and cues, particularly in the online spaces that are limited to pure text.

This does not mean that proving authenticity is. Creating a persona of the opposite gender is easy, but maintaining it becomes more difficult. If a woman is dressed convincingly as a man, no one asks her to prove it; she is just accepted as a man, unless she provides reason to believe that such an identity may be false. Online, though, a person must 'prove' it, must gain a certain amount of authenticity. In real life, a first glance is all that a transgendered person must 'pass'; online, the first glance – the user name – is easily done, but the process of 'passing' as another gender is a continuing one, a performative action that must constantly be engaged in. "In chat rooms, the issue of authenticity has often been raised in regards to the truthfulness of identities displayed in the rooms, taking 'true identity' as a match between the 'real' offline identity and the 'virtual' online one" (Del-Teso-Craviotto 252). People online often worry that the people they talk to don't have real world bodies that correspond to their virtual bodies. Michelle Rodino (1997) writes that "...to continue to appear as a woman, one must continue displaying cues that signify woman" (10). A person must continually strive to 'pass' as the other gender, offering as many cues as possible to concrete that gender as being 'true' or legitimate, even when it biologically is not.

The development of gender identity may be easier to begin online, but it is a continuing process. As Rodino writes, "gender construction is never done, never finalized" (10), and that the inherent nature of Computer Mediated Communication reduces visual and aural cues, thus democratizing communication (7), which makes it easier, again, to present a different gender, though still more difficult to maintain that persona. This is why Susan C. Herring and Anna Martinson (2004) write "Although people might take on a nickname of the opposite gender, for example, it was rare for them to maintain behaviors consistent with that gender over time, due to the strain of having to maintain an artificial persona" (427). CMC is democratized, but gender identity is a continued performance, something that must constantly be worked at in order to maintain. While this is true in real life as well – a transvestite must 'act the part' to continue passing – online that performance is far more constant; people are looking for those false cues online, trying to find holes in the gender performance. In real life, those holes need to be glaring and draw attention; online, those holes are searched for. Gagne et. al. write that "gender – and we would argue, gender identity – is learned and achieved at the interactional level, reified at the cultural level, and institutionally enforced via the family, law, religion, politics, economy, medicine, and the media" (479). While many of these factors are not visibly extant online, the trangenderist must understand all of these factors and be able to pay attention to the gender binaries, so that they provide the right cues for the gender that they identify with.

The performative nature of gender identity makes it a difficult thing to maintain; it is very difficult to pretend to be a different gender, due to the need to constantly present cues, as Rodino suggested above. In the transgendered community, however, we see a space where mistakes are accepted and even expected; in forum posts, newcomers are corrected but assured that their mistakes are okay. Essays are posted online to help people avoid mistakes both on the transgender

board and on thousands of other support sites. Cues that reveal someone to be male when presenting as female in many online settings may result in aggressive or even violent responses, but in the transgendered community, such things are seen more as an opportunity for learning. The cues must be learned, or the transgenderist will present as the wrong gender without realizing it.

Learning these cues is difficult; many of them are so subtle as to be almost subconscious. As Max S. Kirch (1979) writes, "non-verbal communication occurs to a greater extend beneath the level of awareness and though mistakes often arouse feelings of uneasiness in the recipient he does not usually understand why he feels uneasy" (416). While writing is a more conscious act, allowing the writer to pay closer attention to what is said and what cues are presented, many people do not know what the cues are, and so they provide false cues by mistake. False cues can make a person feel uneasy, can make them distrust a person's asserted gender, even if they cannot put their fingers on why. Often, this is because of differences that most people never consider. Herring and Martensen write that "Unconscious use of gendered discourse styles can reveal one's actual gender even when one is performing a different gender (or trying not to give off any gender cues)" (427). Simple differences that most people do not even think about present as one gender or another. If someone identifies as a different gender than their biological makeup, they need to be able to present as their self-identified gender.

This is what online spaces, such as the forum investigated below, are often used for. A transgendered person can come to these spaces to find support, tips, suggestions, and help in 'becoming' their new gender. They learn to present fully as their new gender, to pass, and then they leave this safe online space. As Gagne et. al. write, "Often, after learning to pass and completing the transformation process, transsexuals dropped out of the transgender community and assumed their place as women in society" (501). Once the performance of gender matches the gender a transgenderist identifies as, they no longer need this protected space; they no longer present the wrong cues.

Transgender Forum (www.tgboards.com): Where Can I Go to Get Safe Help?

There is an inherent difficulty to transgenderism in the real world. Gagne et. al. say that "transgenderists, because of changes in gender or biological appearance, are often forced out of the closet, creating awkward or even dangerous situations" (482). Once the body changes, such as surgeries or hormone therapy begin, it is difficult, if not impossible, to disguise. A person is 'outed' whether they want to be or not. For a time, the transgendered person falls outside the heteronormative binary of genders, having both male and female parts. Fortunately, there are communities, such as the TGboards, where they can provide support for one another and help one another move through this transition as smoothly and with as much reassurance as possible.

It is important to once again note that for the purpose of this discussion, we are referring only to transsexuals, rather than transvestites. This is referencing specifically those who are attempting a full conversion to another gender, rather than those who enjoy dressing up and pretending to be a member of that other gender. And while it is true that "Falling in 'between' the gender binary will often result in assumptions of homosexuality, as in the case of the feminine man or the masculine woman" (Gagne et. al. 479), it should be noted that this is rarely true in the case of transvestism. The forum investigated for this project is not for transvestites; it is for full transsexuals, who either have or intend to fully change their gender.

On TGboards, users choose their own nicknames, then have the option of providing either a picture or an image. Posters can also use a signature on all of their posts. They have a further option of becoming members of the online community and creating profiles for themselves with, presumably, more detailed information, but as that information was not publicly available to non-

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members, I did not examine it, as I will do for a more in-depth examination of the community, at a later date.

Very often, the name, signature, and image/picture present as much or more of an identity vis-a-vis gender than the text of the posts. For example, the image of user "FT Michael"[2] presents a very obviously male picture attached to the name, though the name itself implies that Michael was at one point female, and is either still in or just past the transition to the male gender.

Almost universally, images are used more frequently than pictures. Some of these are animated images, some are images from animation (usually anime), and some are images intended to be funny. Usually, it seems as if the images are meant to represent what the person wants to look like, but in extreme cases, such as images from anime or science fiction.

When actual pictures are used, they tend to fall into one of two categories: gendered and non-gendered. Some will be out of focus, covering their faces, or wearing hats and large sunglasses to make it difficult to determine gender, while others will be full on shots of a very clear upper body (the lower body almost never exists in pictures) with certain gender cues such as makeup, long hair, etc to make it very clear which gender the person is intending to claim. One interesting detail is that the clearly gendered pictures were almost exclusively of MTF transgendered, while the indeterminate gender photos were almost exclusively FTM; though this may have some implication for transgendered politics, I am unable to definitely present a reason for this difference.

As for a connection between the use of avatars and the gendering of names, the only correlation I saw was that those with a non-gendered name also had a non-gendered avatar (and almost never a picture). That is, if the name was without gender, whatever image they chose (a street sign, a stuffed animal, an emoticon) tended to be equally non-gendered. This is not to suggest that there weren't people who presented as 'butch' female or 'effeminate' male; only that those who chose names without gender tended to also present an image without gender.

The one exception to this was the user "Dyssonance." Their name is not explicitly gendered, but nor is it explicitly transgendered. It does suggest that there is a disconnect involved, which might allow it to fall into the transgendered category, but this is not the case upon first glance. While the misspelling may be a reference to the some members of the feminist movement using the "Women/Womyn" intentional misspelling, there is no way to tell for certain. What can be seen for certain is that the image Dyssonance uses is not only gendered, but is a picture. Dyssonance presents as a smiling woman with blonde hair. They appear to not have been born female, but the hair style and makeup in the picture (which presents a person only from the neck up) clearly presents it in a gendered sense.

Dyssonance is significant also in that their signature includes a link to a site intended to help people transition genders (www.thisishow.org), a link to two blogs (one defunct), and a link to their Facebook page. All of these suggest clear gender identity, yet the user name she chose does not. Though again, it seems as though it might with further investigation.

More interesting than the names that had no gender or a specific gender were those that were explicitly transgendered. Names like "bigenderific" (who has a photograph that makes it clear that she is now female, suggesting that she is proud to have lived -or to still live- as two genders, and perhaps suggesting that she is equally accepting of either gender for romantic situations) or "Diane Martin" (no picture) were much more prolific than expected. While definitely in the minority, these names appear in virtually every forum discussion at least once.

The names that were lacking images tended to be more descriptive and gender specific/transgendered. "TS_Trisha" has no picture, nor do "JustSarah," "Vicky," "Tracyohus," or "Sam"; the non-gendered names, such as "Someone Else,"[3] have images. And some, like "lvuittonaddict"[4] have photographs to demonstrate either the desire to remain anonymous or a desire to be explicit when

their name is not (lvuittonaddict, which presumably means Loius Vuitton addict, has a picture of herself both with her name and in signature). So when the name itself is not descriptive, the user tends to choose an image that either describes a specific gender or makes explicit the desire to remain gender neutral. In nearly all cases, if there is not a specific gender identity in the name, there is in the image attached the name.

Rhetoric Establishment: What Means of Persuasion Do I Use?

The online space of www.tgboards.com is a place where people can take up their identity positions without fear of retribution. Rodino tells us that "Those who do not fall neatly into male or female categories face ostracism, discrimination, and repression" (2). While true in most of the world, in a safe forum like this one, people can fall between our outside the categories without fear of negative attention. On the board, people can experiment with their own genders, and sometimes they choose to do so by removing gender from the equation.

It is important to note that such a choice is an active choice; users do not accidentally remove gender. This is likely why there is virtually always an image to go along with an intentionally non-gendered name. These images, by nature of their own lack of gender, reinforce the non-gender of the names, as though the users are intentionally stepping out of not only the gender binary, but the concept of gender itself.

Another case where a user plays with the possibilities of gender presentation is "Tawny Frogmouth," who has an image of an owl chick (in the sense of baby bird) with one leg raised. In addition to the name being somewhat non-gendered, the image seems to simultaneously evoke both male and female genders. The young bird is a chick (a word that is often tied with females), which may lead the viewer immediately to think that Tawny is female. But the chick has one leg raised, the way male animals (such as dogs) will raise one leg while marking territory, thus evoking a male image. The name itself also evokes a connected image. The chick in the picture is a Tawny Owl chick; owls are often male when anthropomorphized, as we see both in the case of "Mr. Owl" in the tootsie pop commercial and in the case of Owl in Winnie the Pooh, who (no pun intended) is always given characteristics of the stereotypical male – deep voice, lack of emotion, etc – though there is nothing in the name to insist that he is[5]. The image evokes both masculine and feminine ideas, helping Tawny in the choice to have no gender.

There is also the visually interesting case of the user "Sam." Sam is a name used equally for men and women. It can be short for Samuel or Samantha (likely both in this case), making it nearly an iconic example of a name that could present either male or female. But the user Sam is interesting in that Sam is an exception to the above rules. Sam has no image, no picture. Sam's signature on all posts consists of two words: "Be yourself"; an emotionally charged statement that may be directed precisely at the discussion of gender identity, or as a performative act of eschewing gender for the sake of who a person is, rather than what biological parts they have. The very choice of removing image, removing tags of any kind that would suggest gender, presents a very neutral image for Sam. Sam is gender neutral, neither both male and female, nor than neither. There is no image to present gender, but there is also no image to exclude gender. There is only the suggestion that people be who they are. This signature suggests a profoundly interesting choice in the identity presented online. Sam seems to be suggesting that people can apply any gender at all to Sam, and that Sam will present whatever gender the situation may call for. Del-Teso-Craviotta tells us that "...online environments have offered a space for challenging traditional gendered practices and ideologies, and experimenting with different gender identities" (253), and it seems that users like Sam are doing just that, experimenting simultaneously with both genders, thus giving allegiance to neither. And at the same time, not claiming to be non-gendered as "SomeoneElse" seems to be doing so explicitly.

Transgender forums are a place where people can freely experiment with their gender identity, either by taking on a different gender, transitioning between genders, or stepping outside of gender entirely. The forums are a safe place for this experimentation, outside of "The dominant Western system of gender [that] has made it difficult for those whose gender falls somewhere between or outside of the binary system to understand and accept themselves or be recognized as socially legitimate" (Gagne et. al. 479). The forums are open and accepting of all users, allowing true choice on what gender posters decide to use. They can choose from the binary of male/female, or they can choose a transitional gender, or even choose to have no gender at all. These choices are made as soon as someone joins the forum, and are displayed through the chosen user names, the images or avatars they use, and what (if any) signature they apply to their messages. These are all performative acts, and it is important to see them as such, because "looking at gender as performative makes the break with biology that the notion of gender has been able to forge but has not yet done" (Rodino 5-6).

These performances, the choices of gender, are done through rhetorical means, both visually and in text. That is, the genders users present, the performances they enact, are achieved by the specific use of name, of picture or avatar, and of presentation within the text they write. They use cues to persuade that they are members of one gender or another (or both, or neither), and they present themselves to a 'first glance' with visual rhetoric, producing ideas of gender, again, in the names or pictures they choose to present.

*The Transgender Boards (tgboards.com) examined between August 1 and August 19, 2010.

Notes

[1]Hers is an image of a realistic but cartoon version of a woman with pink hair.
[2]A photograph of what appears to be a young man smiling.
[3]A stylized androgynous eye with the words "So much pain behind these eyes" written around it.
[4]A photograph of what appears to be a smiling young woman in glasses.
[5]In fact, the only character in the Hundred Acre Wood to have an explicit gender is Kanga, because she is Roo's mother. This may warrant future investigation

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