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Amy Billingsley

University of Oregon, amybillingsley@gmail.com

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Technology and Narratives of Continuity in Transgender Experiences¹

Amy Billingsley

Abstract

This essay examines narratives of fundamental change, which portray a break in the continuity between a pre-transition and post-transition transgender subject, in accounts of transgender transitions. Narratives of fundamental change highlight the various changes that occur during transition and its disruptive effects upon a trans subject's continuous identity. First, this essay considers the historical appearance of fundamental change narratives in the social sciences, the media, and their use by families of trans people, partners of trans people, and trans people themselves. After this is a consideration of Mark Johnson's account of narrative as a meaning-making activity that occurs in the context of social norms. Johnson's account is then applied to narratives of fundamental change to explain why these narratives occur, especially in relation to social norms and lived experience. The essay concludes by considering the trajectory of fundamental change narratives, looking at emerging transgender narratives, which stress a more integrated, complex account of transgender lives.

Keywords: narrative, technology, sexual reassignment surgery, gender transition, identity, Mark Johnson, transgender, transsexual, trans

Since the first documented case of sexual reassignment surgery in 1931 (Stryker 2008, 39), and the mass media attention given to Christine Jorgensen's transition in the 1950's (47), gender technology has opened up the question of "sex

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change” to a population that has been simultaneously anxious and intrigued. As Susan Stryker asserts, Jorgensen’s appearance in the media was bolstered by an “intense attention to social gender roles” during the 1950’s (48), and the technology of surgery that seemed to allow crossing from one sex to another would be used as a key feature for Harry Benjamin’s definition of “the transsexual” as a distinct figure (49).

This juxtaposition between anxiety over gender roles and the public’s knowledge of a technology that seemed to cross the enforced binary of sexes unsurprisingly led to questions about personal identity, including considerations of the meaning of sex reassignment surgery for the identity of those who had undergone the procedure.

The question of identity is perhaps brought to its most hyperbolic heights in a 1970 docudrama loosely based on Jorgensen’s life. While depicting Jorgensen’s sexual reassignment surgery, the film enters a dream sequence in which the actor playing Jorgensen jumps into a dark pool of water and sinks until no longer visible. The dramatized version of Jorgensen concludes, “It could have only one meaning: George Jorgensen was gone forever. I was somebody else now” (*The Christine Jorgensen Story* 1970).

This narrative of Jorgensen’s surgery is a narrative of fundamental change, as it suggests that the use of transitioning technology results in the death of the pre-transition subject, with the new post-transition subject emerging as a result. Through this death, transition is framed as a fundamental change in identity, with the old self slipping away forever in contrast to the new emerging self that has been formed during the course of surgery. As will be shown, these narratives are a common way of depicting the identity of trans people who have transitioned, and involve disidentifying their post-transition self from their transitioning or pre-transition identity.

Though the Christine Jorgensen docudrama emphasizes sexual reassignment surgery as a fount of fundamental change, instances of fundamental change narratives may also be triggered by perceived physical appearances in the absence of sexual reassignment surgery specifically. Thus, in this essay I will use the blanket phrase “technologies of transition” to refer to the various medical technologies that may be accessed to alter bodies over the course of transition, such that a trans person² may appear to have significantly changed in appearance as a result of their

² While “trans” is often used to inclusively refer to transgender people, transsexual people, and people who identify as gender queer, this essay will primarily use the term “trans” to refer to people who transition or are planning to transition from one sex/gender to another. The reason for using “trans” in this

use. These technologies include medical explorations into endocrinology and surgery, such as hormone therapy, sexual reassignment surgery, chest reconstruction, facial surgeries, and/or breast augmentation in the context of transition.

While this essay will often highlight the influence of technology in fundamental change narratives, it is also important to acknowledge that technologies of transition are not always necessary to trigger the use of these narratives. Changes in clothing, behavior, and treatment by others in society may be enough to motivate the use of fundamental change narratives, especially when they cause observed differences between a person's pre-transition presentation and their transitioning or post-transition presentation. As will be shown, narratives of fundamental change frequently occur in a social and relational context rather than as a reaction to purely biological changes, and thus an array of changes may be influential in causing someone to adopt a fundamental change narrative.

But before we address instances of fundamental change narratives in more detail, it is important to note that the changes many trans people undergo have also caused philosophers to ask questions about identity and continuity. In her Introduction to *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, Laurie Shrage raises this question, asking, ". . . are these circumstances in which a claim to nonidentity between two stages of once identical selves is literally true?" (Shrage 2009, 3). In a different context, K. Anthony Appiah suggests an answer to this question by clarifying that a "sex change" does not result in a metaphysical change in identity, but it will likely be held to represent a change in the construction of life plans (Appiah 1990, 499), referred to as "ethical identity" (495).

Whereas Appiah asserts that for "us in the modern West" a change of sex is considered to be a more disruptive change for ethical identity than hypothetical changes in race (1990, 497), Georgia Warnke complicates this claim by pointing to the variety of changes that people may experience throughout their life beyond gender and race. Warnke stresses that changes in one's sense of self should be considered in a more contextual manner, as people may consider themselves a "new person" in relation to other factors such as motherhood and learning a language depending on how "conceptually central" these aspects are held to their identity (Warnke 2009, 38-39). And in a more final answer to Shrage's question, Christine Overall claims that a trans person who transitions does not have their identity's continuity severed, because they maintain a post-transition "way of being"

context is because people who transition often identify themselves with a number of terms, including transgender, transsexual, and trans in the way used here.

that “grows out of the previous self” (Overall 2009, 20). Philosophy has thus grappled with metaphysical and social questions raised by the relationship between technologies of transition and the continuity of trans identities.

While these philosophical analyses raise intriguing points about the relationships between gender, race, senses of self, and the continuity of identity, they do not analyze the particular and concrete appearances of fundamental change narratives in society, and thus do not address these narratives’ origins and lasting implications. Appiah does assert that Western society holds gender to be distinctly conceptually important in relation to the continuity of ethical identity, but this analysis remains abstract in relation to actual implementations of fundamental change narratives. Overall also addresses the importance of narratives as a way in which people who transition weave a continuing identity (2009, 21), but this does not address the question of why such fundamental change narratives circulate to begin with, and what they mean for trans people and society.

It is also worth considering the work of Bernice Hausman in this context, as she specifically highlights the role of narrative in understanding transition and related technologies. In *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*, Hausman is concerned about the ways in which narratives of transition risk aligning with sexism and heterosexism under the guise of “gender identity” (Hausman 1995, 137). Within this broader project, Hausman argues that the narratives presented in autobiographies of trans people deny sexual ambiguity in an effort to present an inborn, unchangeable, and irrefutable (153) picture of the gender one is “meant to be” (167). Hausman also notes that trans autobiographies tend to treat hormones and surgery as a simple means to an end rather than acknowledging the pivotal role of technologies in sex reassignment procedures (166-167). The technologies of transition are thus effaced and reduced to tangential, contingent events, regardless of the pain involved (162-163). Hausman thus presents a concern that the resistance of the body to the technologies that seek to alter its materiality never reaches the surface in these autobiographies because the moment of surgery has been obscured from view.

But once again we lack an explicit analysis of fundamental change narratives. Though the kinds of narratives that Hausman examines also frame the changes that transition involves, they deal with these changes via erasure rather than highlighting them as a focal point of identity conversion. Consequently, Hausman’s text is exclusively concerned with the ways in which narratives about trans people make technology invisible, but fundamental change narratives such as the death of George and the birth of Christine found in the Christine Jorgensen docudrama instead highlight the role of technology as a tool of sensationalism and a centerpiece for depicting changes in sex. The film explicitly depicts George’s final plummet into the

abyssal water while showcasing scenes of Christine's dramatized surgery (*The Christine Jorgensen Story* 1970).

A comprehensive analysis of the fundamental change narrative would call attention to another pattern within trans narratives that contrasts with Hausman's emphasis on erased technology, explaining the features of another significant path that narratives of transition may take. This will not render Hausman's account of effacement narratives irrelevant. And while the analysis below will differ with Hausman's analysis by aligning Jan Morris's narrative of transition in *Conundrum* with narratives of fundamental change, a survey of fundamental change narratives will primarily involve review of texts and media that Hausman did not consider.³

In this essay, I will contribute to this literature on transition, narratives, and personal identity by examining narratives of fundamental change. Doing so will indicate that fundamental change narratives are used by both trans people and non-trans people to understand or justify transition in the context of a society that often harbors gender ideologies and institutions which risk denying lived experiences of transition. This denial is effected by a narrative strategy, which disidentifies a post-transition trans person from their experiences of transition and frequently highlights technologies of transition as a means of fundamental change.

First, I will consider historical appearances of these narratives in the social sciences, the media, and their use by families of trans people, partners of trans people, and trans people themselves. Second, I will refer to Mark Johnson's explanation of narrative as an activity of meaning-making and justification that draws from societal norms to explain plausible sources that encourage the use of fundamental change narratives. After considering these sources in relation to societal transphobia, I will then explain some drawbacks of using fundamental change narratives, as they risk a disavowal of the work, pain, and oppression involved in transition. The essay will then conclude by considering popular emerging narratives that may indicate a movement away from fundamental change narratives and towards a more integrated account of trans lives.

³ To take this pluralism of narrative analysis further, it also seems like a false dilemma to posit that a particular text or media can only use a narrative of fundamental change *or* a narrative of effacement. It is possible that even the same text or media may switch between the two in different places. This essay also differs from Hausman's by approaching narratives from the perspective of trans feminism, and hence will avoid referring to trans identities as "illusions" or "simulations" (Hausman 193).

Narratives Of Fundamental Change

The narrative of fundamental change appears in numerous areas, including anthropology and psychology, which provide a general description and acknowledgment of its existence in the context of social rituals or therapeutic outcomes. In Anne Bolin's anthropological study of transsexual rites of passage, *In Search of Eve*, she describes trans women's genital reassignment surgeries as being "the final phase of their rebirth as women. Transition has been a period of ritual births and deaths, but the rite of incorporation is itself a metaphorical summation of these into a primary ritual of rebirth" (Bolin 1987, 180). In this 'rite of passage' narrative, the old pre-transition self dies and the new post-transition self emerges through the use of sexual reassignment surgery. Hence, instead of effacing the role of technology in trans people's lives, this narrative frames the technology of sexual reassignment as a culminating moment laden with the birth and death of a trans subject.

In Arlene Istar Lev's *Transgender Emergence*, a book of therapeutic guidelines for trans people, Lev stresses the need for transsexual people to "fully integrate themselves into their new identity" and "not deny their previous selves" (Lev 2004, 266). The need to specify this approach to identity indicates that trans people may decide to frame themselves in opposition to their pre-transition way of life. While this tendency to disidentify with one's past could arise from non-surgical elements of transition, the changes brought on by the technology of hormones and sexual reassignment surgery still stand out as especially transformative upon conceptions of self-identity. In this way, the fundamental change narratives that Bolin and Lev consider may highlight the role of technology in one's transition rather than obscuring its importance from view.

A consideration of actual implementations of fundamental change narratives in society, such as in the media, provides a more concrete look at how these narratives are used. While media coverage of trans people often highlights the naturalness or destiny of transition, the media has also often turned to narratives of fundamental change as a source for sensationalism. For example, this is seen in the media's frequent insistence upon showing 'before and after' photos of the trans people they interview and the common practice of mentioning the legal names trans guests were initially assigned. When Oprah Winfrey conducted her famous interview with Thomas Beatie, highlighted as "the pregnant man," her website focused on pictures of him as a Miss Hawaii USA contestant and employed his birth-assigned name when speaking about his past ("Unprecedented Pregnancy" 2008).

Julia Serano acknowledges this trend, linking it to a similar sensationalism accorded to plastic surgeries and gastric bypasses (Serano 2007, 56). Serano argues that these specific changes are given so much emphasis because "the subjects cross what is normally considered an impenetrable class boundary: from unattractive to

beautiful, from fat to thin, and in the case of transsexuals, from male to female, or from female to male" (57). And each of these supposedly impenetrable class boundaries are related to technological advancements in surgery. Ultimately, these shows often attempt to show as dissonant as possible an image from pre-transition to post-transition. Continuing from the example of Winfrey's showcase of Thomas Beatie, Winfrey's website hosted pre-transition photos that specifically served to highlight how much technology had changed Beatie's appearance after his transition. The "before," or pre-transition photos and the "after," or post-transition photos attempt to construct a narrative of fundamental difference by shocking the audience into wondering how both photos could display the same person.

Combined with these displays of "before" and "after," the way Winfrey's website refers to Thomas Beatie also reflects another example of fundamental change narratives: the separation of self in accounts. As Beatie tells the story of his transition, the website refers to his pre-transition self with a different name and female pronouns, while referring to Beatie in the present as Thomas Beatie, a man with male pronouns. When Thomas describes having been a Miss Hawaii Teen USA finalist, the website specifies that this was actually Tracy, as "her father began encouraging her to be a model." And when Thomas recounts being in a relationship with a martial arts instructor, the website reports, "Tracy entered into a relationship with her martial arts instructor" ("Unprecedented Pregnancy" 2008). This continuing frame leads the website to construct statements that refer to the same person with two different names and as two different people:

During her college years, Tracy began to discover her true gender identity. "That's when I found myself," Thomas says. "It was a process of self-discovery for me, and I ended up having my first girlfriend. We were together for three and a half years" ("Unprecedented Pregnancy" 2008).

The website's use of language frames this distinct Tracy person, female pronouns and all, as separate from the male-pronounced Thomas. Considered in isolation, these statements could be rationalized as an attempt at navigating Thomas's temporal change of address in relation to the gendered aspects of pronouns and proper names. But combined with the pictures differentiating Tracy from Thomas, this framework lends itself towards a narrative of Thomas's life that effectively frames him as two distinct people, telling the story of a fundamental change from Tracy to Thomas for the awe of the audience.

Relationships between trans people and their families are another area where fundamental change narratives are concretely applied, usually as an attempt by a non-trans person to navigate their relationship with someone who is transitioning. The most direct way in which this narrative occurs is through accounts of parents who say they "lost" one gendered child to gain another. In *Trans Forming Families*, for example, a mother of a trans woman writes, "As parents, we may have lost a

son, but we have gained a daughter,” (Samson 2003, 48). Later, the mother clarifies this loss as more about the expectations she had for the child she “lost” rather than the child herself (46). This indicates a faint undercurrent of fundamental change, but it is not full-blown. The rhetoric of “loss” is far more explicit in the writing of another mother of a trans woman who recollects, “Two years later the memory of my anger has faded, as has the memory of that lost person, my eldest son, Michael. The new person, Kelly, has become familiar and loved” (Lister 2003, 40). In this instance the mother feels that not only have her dreams and expectations ceased to exist, but also her “son.” This mother also uses the narrative of fundamental change and its link with technology to understand the rest of her family’s reaction to Kelly’s transition: “It was not until a family reunion after the surgery that the structure of the family re-formed to include this new person whom they decided to christen with a more affectionate name, ‘Kelly’” (38).

Relationships between trans people and their significant others may also involve similar narrative negotiations by non-trans people. Gayle Salamon considers this in the context of relationships between trans men and lesbian women in “Transfeminism and the Future of Gender,” noting the “violence in circulation in discussions of transition” within the lesbian community (Salamon 2008, 127). Salamon writes, “Transition is further framed as if it is akin to a death or as if the post-transition subject will, with hir emergence, enact the death of the pretransition subject” (127). Gayle Rubin, also addressing tensions between trans men and the lesbian community in “Of Catamites and Kings”, describes the way “lovers of FTMs often have intense feelings of loss, grief, and abandonment” (Rubin 2006, 478). This grief does not mean that partners will necessarily embrace the fundamental change narrative, as these feelings could be caused by a loss of relationship expectations. However, it is also possible that, as with some parents, the partner of a trans man may decide that they have become a completely different person after transition, especially given the common fundamental change discourse in the lesbian community described by Salamon.

Trans people themselves also sometimes express that their identity has undergone a fundamental change upon transition. Sandy Stone’s classic work in Transgender Studies, “The Empire Strikes Back,” focuses on this aspect in Jan Morris’ account of transition. While Hausman focuses on Morris’ narrative as an account that primarily strives for a unified gendered self (Hausman 1995, 163), Morris also asserts that the technology of transition effected a fundamental conversion of her being. Recalling the moments before her surgery, Morris writes, “I went to say good-bye to myself in the mirror. We would never meet again, and I wanted to give that other self a long last look in the eye, a wink for luck” (Stone 2006, 222). Stone summarizes her account bluntly: “Exit James Morris, enter Jan Morris...” two

separate selves (222). Aaron H. Devor explains why this separation of self occurs in his model of transsexual identity formation:

Transition...means the leaving behind of a way of life. This departure from the total experience that comprises living as a woman or a man can be felt as a kind of death of a huge part of oneself. Thus transition also frequently brings with it a kind of grieving for the person that one once was but no longer will be. (Devor 2004, 16)

Here, Devor is describing that the self-felt differences between living as a woman versus living as a man can lead trans people to separate those two experiences completely. But it is also crucial to acknowledge the role of technology in Jan Morris' account, as the moment of sexual reassignment signals the death knell for her previous self.

This overview of fundamental change narratives reveals that they involve negotiations between the changes brought about by transition, the technology that allows many of these changes to occur, the relationships between trans people and non-trans people, and trans people's own understandings of their identity and lived experiences over time. While Bolin, Lev, Devor, and Stryker call attention to the fundamental change narrative in relation to the personal identity of trans people, the use of fundamental change narratives by Winfrey's website and by non-trans family and significant others also indicates that fundamental change narratives facilitate the ways in which non-trans people understand transition.

More precisely, Winfrey's website attempts to align the changes allowed by technologies of transition with a sensationalist presentation of Beatie's story as a miraculous conversion from one person to another that is marketed to broader, largely non-trans audiences. And when fundamental change narratives are evoked in the context of relationships between trans and non-trans people, this again involves an attempt by non-trans people to find a narrative that makes sense of the changes that their friends or loved ones are going through by understanding their transition as a road to a fundamentally new self.

This indicates that we need to consider fundamental change narratives not only in relation to self-accounts of identity by trans people, but also as a series of narratives that often eclipse trans experiences and facilitate the ways that non-trans people attempt to understand both trans people and the effects of transition upon identity. To do this, we require a theory of narratives that allows us to understand both individual negotiations of personal identity and social influences that may transcend the individuals who refer to them.

Narratives And Navigating Social Norms

Now that I have considered several instances of the fundamental change narrative, it is worth considering the significance of this framework for how both trans people and non-trans people account for experiences of transition in relation to identity. Though Overall describes her investigation into transition and identity as a “theory of the metaphysics of sex/gender transitions” (Overall 2009, 22), she specifically turns to narrative as a device through which the question of a trans person’s continuing identity can be framed (21). Overall asserts that “sex/gender identity [is] developed by and understood through a series of interpretations,” further adding that “...*whatever* our sex/gender identity may be, we develop them by, in effect, creating the continuing narrative of our lives” (21; italics original). Though these continuing interpretations involve a significant “freedom to choose” on the part of trans people, Overall also situates this description in the social world, explaining that the social norms and ways of policing nonconformity in a culture will heavily influence the extent to which a trans person has access to self-determination and self-interpretation (21). Overall’s approach thus indicates that narratives are a useful device for understanding how continuous identities can be sustained through interpretations while simultaneously embedded in one’s social world.

In addition to negotiating between freedom of choice and one’s social situatedness, Overall’s gesture towards narrative as a way to understand trans people’s continuing identities is a useful departure from metaphysics for our purposes, since it is unclear whether people who invoke narratives of fundamental change actually believe that a trans person has had their old identity metaphysically pulverized. It thus seems more compelling to characterize these depictions as narratives rather than as a popular foray into trans metaphysics or an attempt to grapple with some “gender of Theseus” problem, as fundamental change depictions rely more on invoking a particular story or interpretation to explain transition.⁴ Though Overall provides a helpful acknowledgment of narratives in the context of identity continuity, her consideration of narrative occurs in only one small section in a larger piece on the metaphysics of identity. Consequently, it will be useful to consider a more detailed account of narratives in order to understand how

⁴ The ship of Theseus is a classic puzzle of identity introduced by the ancient Greek historian Plutarch, who noticed that philosophers argued over whether the ship of Theseus retained its identity after rotting planks were replaced over time (Plutarch 2001, 14). Incidentally, the original version of this essay was entitled “The Gender of Theseus,” and provided a metaphysical rather than narrative-based analysis.

narratives as a device function in the context of fundamental change interpretations.

Mark Johnson does just this in *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, emphasizing that narratives provide an integral source of self-understanding and self-justification for humans living in a world with others (Johnson 1993, 154). While his book is primarily focused on ethics, Johnson is also concerned about the role of narratives in humans' search for meaning in their lives (177). In this context, narratives are relevant because they allow humans to "organize and reorganize our experience from moment to moment" such that we can form an understanding of the world and our place within it (152). Johnson thus expands narrative to include not only "linguistic stories" that we tell others, but also our imaginative activity of synthesizing our experiences (152) such that we can make a connected account of the events that occur throughout our lives. This also means that narrative does not include merely textual discourse, since "nonlinguistic, non-propositional language structures" are also involved with our activities of interpretation (153).

By extending the notion of narratives beyond the general act of storytelling, Johnson shares Overall's concern with the ways humans synthesize our actions in relation to identity (154), but he focuses specifically on giving an account of ourselves to others. Johnson argues that narratives are not the properties of a self-making individual, but instead draw from broader societal values when we seek to justify our actions (155). After providing a sex worker's narrative explanation for how she came to choose sex work, Johnson writes,

This woman is trying to explain, to another, and thereby to understand for herself, who she is, why she came to be where she is today, and how things work in her world. More important, she is trying to justify herself morally in terms of the values and practices of her culture. She is trying to construct a narrative explanation that will be morally acceptable in her social and cultural setting. (155)

This passage indicates that the narratives we use to synthesize our experience and identities in coherent ways also depend to a large extent on the norms of our culture, especially when narrative is put forth as a mode of justification towards another person. And this element of justifying our life to others is (understandably) missing from Overall's account. Overall does acknowledge the limits of narratives in the context of a social world, but mostly frames trans narratives as "an ongoing narrative project that [resists] the original sex/gender assignment, opting instead for transition" (Overall 1995, 21). Johnson's consideration of narratives as a form of justification toward oneself and others in the context of a social world allows us to

deepen Overall's general description of narratives as a tool of resisting an original sex/gender assignment, as it is also important to consider the ways in which these narratives may involve an appeal of justification to society.

Johnson, like Overall, insists that we are not entirely bound to the roles or narratives into which we are thrown and forced to perpetuate social norms wholesale. Because humans are frequently imaginative, meaning-making creatures (Johnson 1993, 177), the employment of narrative as a way to unify our experience into an understandable trajectory (170) can often tinker with narratives in ways that reconfigure them according to our own goals. In this way, Johnson's account of narrative is compatible with his experientialist view of a self that is creative and able to "transform our experience" within "limits marked by our biological and cultural being" as part of a "constrained freedom" (161).

Finally, Johnson's account can assist with understanding the specific role of technology when it is emphasized in fundamental change narratives. Johnson argues that narrative structures often borrow from imaginative patterns in order to synthesize experience into meaning (Johnson 1993, 166). Chief among these patterns is the "SOURCE-PATH-GOAL" schema, which "consists structurally of a starting point, a contiguous series of intermediate points, and an end point" (166). This further links narratives with stories, as they often frame events in relation to a starting point, a series of intermediate movements, and "some culminating event" (166). In addition to this, Johnson notes that narratives often turn upon some sort of "*agon*, a struggle or conflict" during the journey to a concluding destination (168).

If we look at narratives of fundamental change in relation to this SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema, we find that the pre-transition self serves the role of source or initial state, while the post-transition self is characterized as the goal or culminating status. This is clear in the presentation of Beatie's 'before and after' pictures on Winfrey's website, with 'before and after' serving as proxies for the 'source and goal' of Beatie's transition. And technologies of transition do not serve as the *agon* in this situation, but are instead facilitators of the path. It is the pre-transition subject, the source to be moved away from, who is framed as both origin and *agon* in narratives of fundamental change. In the Christine Jorgensen docudrama, George is the source and *agon* who ultimately fades away from view during a dreamlike montage of sexual reassignment surgery, and this technology is ultimately able to provide the path to the goal of Christine (*The Christine Jorgensen Story* 1970).

At the level of navigating one's personal identity, it is useful to consider the use of fundamental change narratives as an attempt to justify trans experiences in relation to acceptable societal norms and values. Trans people do not exist within a self-determining vacuum, but rather inhabit a social world that is laden with assumptions about what transition involves and how trans people should live. Consequently, the use of narratives such as the narrative of fundamental change

may often be an attempt by a trans person to justify their life in a way that non-trans people will accept and understand. This corresponds with Johnson's description of applying narratives to one's life in the context of social embeddedness, as discussed above.

But what of the usage and formulation of fundamental change narratives by non-trans people, who, as we saw in the context of Winfrey's website, often shape narratives of transition for their own purposes? To some extent, this aspect is implicitly present in the account we derived from Johnson of trans people synthesizing narratives of their lived experiences from their social situation, as fundamental change narratives may be listed among the socially constructed 'menu' of narratives from which trans people can choose.

But this description may focus on the ability of individual trans people to weave their own path while failing to account for the way in which these narratives might be architected by non-trans people, who often have more social power. Consequently, a discussion of possible motivations for narratives of fundamental change is required to determine both the social messages and personal motivations present in such narratives as they are constructed and referenced by both trans *and* non-trans people.⁵

Change We Can Believe In

If, as Johnson asserts, narratives are often used as a justification of our life to others in society, then this means that society may have certain standards to which they expect narratives to conform in order to be acceptable or even understandable. Likewise, if certain narratives are often used by non-trans people to understand trans people, to the extent that trans people may be strongly motivated to adopt

⁵ In *Ecological Thinking* Lorraine Code argues that Johnson's account of the subject overemphasizes individualist self-determination to the point of missing the often hegemonic character of the narratives from which we draw (Code 2006, 223), including the ways narratives may be imposed upon people by others (224). In *Sovereign Masculinity* Bonnie Mann describes the ability of words and narratives to "assign us our place in existence," which may provide resources for a more internal critique and reworking of Johnson's account of narrative than Code's due to shared resources in George Lakoff's work (Mann 2014, 139, 143). But a detailed epistemological extension of Johnson's account of personal identity outside of individual meaning-making is beyond the scope of the present essay's goals of accounting for fundamental change narratives. Thanks to Anna Cook, Devin Fitzpatrick, Jon LaRochelle, and Gus Skorborg for these references.

these narratives, this indicates that narratives of fundamental change can tap into social practices or beliefs that give them some force of social justification.⁶

Consequently, one possible motivation for the acceptance of fundamental change narratives as a justificatory device is the constructed oppositional binary between male and female, already described by Aristotle's *Metaphysics* when he asserts that the Pythagorean school declared "Male-Female" to be opposite principles (Aristotle 1991, 343). Julia Serano writes of a similar phenomenon, calling it oppositional sexism. According to Serano, oppositional sexism can be defined as "[a form of sexism] that is rooted in the presumption that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive, "opposite" sexes, each possessing a unique and non-overlapping set of attributes, aptitudes, abilities, and desires" (Serano 2008). Oppositional sexism is the belief that female is the opposite of male, the negation of male is female, and male and female can never exist in the same space. 'Female' and 'male' hence become polar entities, both linguistically and logically.

Sandy Stone also notices this trend in "The Empire Strikes Back," asserting that in early transsexual narratives, "the authors...reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between" (Stone 225). This form of narrative hence frames men and women as unambiguously different, relying on the oppositional sexism described by Serano. Stone notes how surgeons would employ "the strategy of building barriers with a single subject" between their pre-transition and post-transition selves (225), ensuring an oppositional status would remain within the transsexual person and therefore "deny[ing] the potentialities of mixture" of male and female to "preserve 'pure' gender identity" (226). In this way, patients' "male selves" and "female selves" were separated by the surgeons so that oppositional sexism could remain intact, with both sides cast as irreconcilable categories. The narrative of fundamental change hence may be put forth as a story of transition that draws from societal assumptions about the purity of these oppositions in order to understand and justify transition.

Beyond conceptions of sex/gender and their relation to fundamental change narratives as a means of accounting for transition, widespread misinformation about technologies of transition is another likely reason for their use. Perhaps the best example of this is a *South Park* episode, eloquently titled "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New

⁶ This is not to say that non-trans people consciously craft the narrative of fundamental change and issue a fiat to powerless trans subjects who must adopt it, but rather that the general social situation and power differences between trans and non-trans people may encourage the usage of certain narratives.

Vagina,” in which the recurring character Mr. Garrison simply walks in for “reassignment surgery,” has it performed without any anesthesia, and leaves the room magically transformed into Mrs. Garrison (“Mr. Garrison’s Fancy New Vagina” 2007).

The framework of this episode accords with other ways in which technologies of transition are singled out from the general life history of trans people, reducing transition and the people who choose to transition to a single, fetishized moment divorced from context. In reality, transitioning does not involve a simple light-switch flick between female and male, and sexual reassignment surgery is not the only method people use to transition. If we consider the additional factors of pain and recovery time, it is clear that no transition can be instantaneous, and the case of Mrs. Garrison and others like it exist only in fiction. However, if a non-trans person has misconceptions of transition as instantaneous, then this could make it easier to posit a particular moment (typically sexual reassignment surgery) as a moment of fundamental identity conversion.

It is also important to consider historical interactions between trans people and non-trans people as a potential source of fundamental change narratives, especially in the context of social institutions. Another cause of fundamental change narratives, especially in older accounts, is likely the historical expectation that trans people not reveal their history after they have transitioned, often referred to as being “stealth.” Jamison Green mentions the pressure to be stealth in “Look! No, Don’t!” writing,

Non-stealth] behaviour is completely at cross-purposes with the stated goals of medical and psychological treatment for transsexual people. That treatment is supposed to make us feel normal. We are not supposed to want attention as transsexuals; we are supposed to want to fit in as ‘normal’ men...In short, in order to be a good – or successful – transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. (Green 2006, 501)

Trans people are often encouraged to assimilate into a transphobic world in order to be considered adequate human beings, and in the past this has been enforced by the directions of the medical community.

Serano mentions this in *Whipping Girl*, noting the way “trans people were required to invent gender consistent (i.e., [non-transsexual]) histories for themselves, so that if they were ever questioned about their pasts, they would not have to reveal their trans status” (Serano 2007, 124). People who transition were encouraged to cut off their ties to friends and family and relocate, taking pains to ensure nobody ever found out about their transsexual history, to the extent that openly identifying oneself as trans could be accused of behaving pathologically by

medical practitioners (125). In this context, it makes sense that trans people would adopt a narrative that reflected the demands of non-trans doctors to abandon their current mode of living and construct a completely new one.

This focus on institutional interactions between trans and non-trans people also intersects with the lived experience of trans people, as this setup effectively forced trans people to construct a new life separated from the old one. Even if they kept their identities continuous before and after the move, their place of living and way of life would be rendered dramatically different. This splitting of one life into two parts could have easily caused people to look at their selves as having been split into two parts, and thus the compelled practice of stealth lent itself towards a fundamental change narrative. Additionally, this pried trans people from the friends and family who previously knew them, perhaps leading those left behind to consider the person they once knew as living not just a new life, but as a new person.

Finally, we cannot disregard the possibility that lived experience may lead a non-trans person to adopt the fundamental change narrative for personal reasons, as the fundamental change narrative can also be adopted in a way that is therapeutic. In the past, transsexualism often was referred to as gender dysphoria, which centers on the depression and anxiety a trans person feels when not living as or being perceived as their preferred sex (Brown and Rounsley 1996, 10). After transitioning, this dysphoria often dissipates, and a person might lose the depression and anxiety associated with it, feeling much better. People who have transitioned may find dwelling upon such an emotionally difficult time period of their life stressful and remember the feelings they once had. Additionally, trans people often feel regret about not having transitioned earlier, or being forced to live in a society that did not recognize their self-asserted identity prior to transition.⁷ In choosing to not acknowledge the part of their life that caused them so much pain, trans people can disassociate their current, happier self from their miserable past self.

This analysis indicates that while fundamental change narratives may personally be adopted by trans people for therapeutic or experiential reasons, narratives of fundamental change may also evoke societal assumptions or misunderstandings that can be inattentive or even harmful to trans experiences. For example, while beliefs in a sex/gender binary may empower narratives of fundamental change as a source of self-justification to others in a sexist society, as noted by Stone in the context of surgeons, the sex/gender binary does not seem to permit the reality of those who do in fact 'cross' its seams or experience a more

⁷ For example, a 2012 mental health survey of trans people in Scotland found that far more trans people regretted not transitioning earlier than regretted having transitioned (McNeil et al. 2012, 67).

prolonged, ambiguous space of sex/gender embodiment. Additionally, historical mandates that trans people neither present themselves visibly as trans nor mix their pre-transition and post-transition life masks the actual existence of trans people and their experiences of transition.⁸ This indicates that narratives of fundamental change may often not be a neutral way to frame transition, but also can bring into play the erasure or fracturing of trans people's experiences.

This raises the question of to what extent narratives of fundamental change will remain relevant if trans people and their transitions are more visible in society, especially if more trans people are given a voice to express their life narratives in new ways. Hence it will be useful to consider ways in which trans people might creatively experiment with given narratives to navigate their social world and considering the possibility that they may tinker with new ways of understanding their identity and life trajectory.⁹ The next section will round out our analysis of fundamental change narratives by explicitly considering some of their drawbacks for trans lives and looking at factors that may significantly diminish their use in society at this particular moment in time.

Emerging Narratives

This analysis of possible social motivations behind fundamental change narratives indicates that these narratives may often depend upon problematic origins, including misinformation about technologies of transition and binary assumptions about sex/gender. Hence, while it is understandable that many trans people might turn to narratives of fundamental change as a source of meaning, it is also worth considering what possibilities for self-understanding these narratives close off. While this essay introduces narratives of fundamental change as distinct from Hausman's emphasis on the effacement of technology in transition narratives, fundamental change narratives similarly risk purifying and demarcating a post-transition body from bodies in transition.

But fundamental change narratives are distinct from the effacement narratives that Hausman focuses on because they often *highlight* transition technologies as

⁸ Stone voices this concern, asserting that for trans people the practice of passing as non-trans and constructing a "plausible history" of a non-trans life can entail "erasing a considerable portion of their personal experience" (Stone 231).

⁹ In this way, we are diverging from Hausman's assertion that trans people are "the dupes of gender" (Hausman 1995, 140) and instead looking at a more creative account of trans people navigating their social norms and the narratives with which they have been presented, which will often result in subtle and direct confrontations with societal assumptions.

part of the cauterization of a post-transition subject from the transition process. This results in the unique irony that technology's power of fundamental change serves as its own vanishing act, perhaps reflecting the broader irony that historically the most successful trans person has been understood as the person who has been purified of their trans status.¹⁰ Hence, even in the course of emphasizing technology, the fundamental change narrative also divorces a post-trans subject from the work, pain, and achievements that are part of the transition process. Though retained in memory, these experiences risk being framed as merely a precursor to a post-transition subject who emerges as the culmination of a process that pre-existed them.

If the work and pain of transition is separated from the self who emerged from it, this also risks covering over the experiences of transphobic oppression and violence that a trans person may have faced while attempting to gain access to the technologies that would permit a better way of life. Though the points that are labeled "transitioning" as opposed to "post-transition" are often vague, usually the designation of "transitioning" refers to a particularly difficult time of pronounced gender ambiguity, which can multiply the risk of harassment and violence within a society that still largely demands unambiguous men and unambiguous women. If we return to Johnson's description of narrative as a process of synthesizing one's experience into a larger meaning, the fundamental change narrative risks bracketing out the work, pain, oppression, and violence of transition from one's self-understanding in an effort to distance oneself from that phase of life. Furthermore, such a designation between transitioned bodies and bodies in transition risks curtailing solidarity among people who have transitioned, those who are transitioning, and people with fluid gender identities in an effort to appeal to the pure boundaries between men and women often demanded by society.

In this context, it is crucial to pay attention to Johnson's emphasis on the contextual dimensions of narratives, and how changing social circumstances may open up the possibility for emerging narratives of transition and lived experience. Narratives of fundamental change have often been evoked in historical circumstances in which many trans people have either been compelled to remain silent about their history, or encouraged to tell their story in a way that could be adopted by a population that continues to be hostile and suspicious about trans identities. And yet, 2014 indicated progress for the recognition of trans people with Laverne Cox's appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine in June (Steinmetz 2014), and the framework of the article is a distinct step forward from just a few years ago

¹⁰ This is addressed by both Green (Green 2006, 501) and Serano (2007, 124-125) who are mentioned in the preceding section.

when trans people started receiving recognition from venues such as *Oprah* in the mid-to-late 2000's.

In an interview on *Time's* website, Cox does not distance herself from her past, but instead tells a continuous narrative that includes her pre-transition childhood and adolescence experiences along with the post-transition acting work that has made her famous. The inclusion of Cox's past history in her account allows her to reflect upon how being bullied as a child continues to affect her life, and it is this acknowledgment that causes her to make further political claims against the continuing bullying of gender variant kids in schools (Steinmetz 2014a).

In this way, her experiences of the past and the trauma she experienced is not forgotten, but instead carried forward to inspire claims for the amelioration of trans people. Cox has also used her experience as a trans woman of color to reframe the discussion of trans people to focus on social justice in the face of intersections between transphobia, racism, and classism (Steinmetz 2014a). In this way, Cox has not only turned away from narratives of fundamental change, but has also directed trans narratives in general towards a discussion of how transition relates to domination and empowerment rather than continuing the tradition of narrating transition in a way that will appeal to non-trans norms and anxieties.

While Cox has also stressed that trans people should not be compelled to account for surgery in the context of talk shows such as Katie Couric's (Gold 2014), this does not mean that the role of technology is effaced in trans lives. Indeed, understanding one's life as an integration rather than a discontinuity may involve embracing the continuing roles that technology has played in shaping current experiences. Instead it indicates, as Johnson might phrase it, that Cox is creatively working upon the narratives that non-trans people expect and insisting upon a discussion that centers the needs of trans people on their own terms. When one writes of the effacement of technology in trans accounts, it is crucial to keep in mind the ways in which technology is often used as a rhetorical tool to cast trans people as artificial or exotic, which takes up discursive space and time that trans people could use to articulate their identities and their political goals in their own voices.

Cox locates her success in mainstream media within a larger context of emerging trans narratives. She explains,

We are in a place now where more and more trans people want to come forward and say 'This is who I am.' And more trans people are willing to tell their stories. More of us are living visibly and pursuing our dreams visibly, so people can say, 'Oh yeah, I know someone who is trans.' When people have points of reference that are humanizing, that demystifies difference. (Steinmetz 2014b, 40)

Cox's integrated account of her life thus occurs within the context of not only an increasing amount of familiarity of trans people in the public eye, but also the proliferation of discourses that involve trans people giving an account of their life narratives and goals on their own terms. Cox associates the increasing ability for trans people to speak on their own terms with the use of social media and Internet venues which allow trans people to express themselves in ways that are often less filtered by the narrative demands of more mainstream media venues such as talk shows. Cox asserts,

Social media has been a huge part of it and the Internet has been a huge part of it, where we're able to have a voice in a way that we haven't been able to before. We're being able to write our stories and we're being able to talk back to the media ... We are the reason. And we are setting the agenda in a different way. (Cox)

This may indicate that the increasing ability of trans people to speak on their own terms without having their accounts totalized by non-trans social norms is resulting in many integrative, complex narratives. If this is the case, these narratives are may go beyond a simple effacement or fixation on technology, and towards more complex ways of navigating the relationship between the body, technology, and life history. And in the context of a society that often fixates exclusively upon the surgical technologies involved in transition, a refusal to weave a narrative that highlights surgery as a focal moment of trans people's lives may signal a refusal to comply with non-transsexual narrative demands rather than discounting the role of technology altogether.

Appealing to Cox's interview in order to project a hopeful vision of emerging trans narratives may seem a bit hasty, and potentially risks reducing the politics of narratives to a dependence upon heroic, celebrity figures (Bassichis et al. 2013, 659). However, Cox's references to trans people crafting narratives on their own terms has also been a recurring theme in transgender studies. Several formative texts include this theme, including Leslie Feinberg's assertion in 1992 that "Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definitions" (Feinberg 1992, 6), and Stone's call for transsexual people to "begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written" (Stone 232). And more recently, Stryker has ended the trajectory of *Transgender History* by noting "The growing acceptability of transgender representation in mass media" (Stryker 2008, 153), while Kate Bornstein expresses in *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* that trans people are no longer "just quietly grateful for being allowed to live" but instead are open to being "righteously cranky" (Bornstein and Bergman 2010, 21).

Additionally, research on trans people and the Internet has indicated that certain spaces, such as Tumblr, may serve as venues for contesting the “silences and misrepresentations of trans people in public culture,” instead offering an alternative space for trans people to share information and express themselves (Fink and Miller 2014, 614). This includes complications of trans narratives from intersecting standpoints of “racial, disabled, activist, artistic, and transnational” identities (616), and general “possibilities for expanding trans self-representations” (624). While more research is required on these emerging narratives, considering these aspects both situates Cox in a larger conversation with transgender studies and begins lending academic credence to her claims about the role of the Internet in emerging trans narratives.

Considering the potential for emerging trans narratives indicates that fundamental change narratives are socially and historically situated. It will be crucial to track whether and how narratives of fundamental change may be altered or fall out of use over time. This analysis also indicates that while we may remain hopeful of emerging trans narratives, these narratives might continue to appeal to norms, beliefs, and institutions that privilege non-trans people over trans people.

If we are currently experiencing a “transgender tipping point” in narratives, in which direction are they going to fall? In a recent interview, Stryker expresses concerns that contemporary expansions of trans representations in popular culture risk playing into “a neoliberal progress narrative” that ignores racism and globalization, although she also praises particular trans celebrities such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock, who both “speak out on race, classism, the prison-industrial complex, and sex-work” (Dierkes-Thrun 2014). Stryker’s hopeful vigilance thus indicates that we must continue to look at how popular narratives of trans people’s lives are constructed and navigated over time by both trans and non-trans people.

In sum, narratives of fundamental change have historically occurred in the social sciences, the media, and in accounts by families of trans people, partners of trans people, and trans people themselves. Considering Mark Johnson’s explanation of narrative as a meaning-making activity that draws from societal norms indicates that oppositional sexism, misinformation about transition, stealth, and minimizing distress make fundamental change narratives an attractive framework for accounts of transition. While these factors encourage fundamental change narratives to disidentify a post-transition trans person from their experiences of transition, changing historical circumstances may also enable emerging integrative narratives of transition, which emphasize the ability for trans people to develop their own voice. This essay consequently points towards further research on not only the varieties of transition narratives and their likely causes, but also the ways in which changing historical circumstances open up possibilities for emerging narratives that contest non-trans assumptions and allow trans people to speak on their own terms.

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AMY BILLINGSLEY is a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon, where she focuses on the intersections between feminist post-structuralism and humor studies in the context of humor's dual capacity for emancipation and subjugation. Her research interests also include 19th century continental philosophy and transgender studies. Most recently, she has published "Hope in a Vice: Carole Pateman, Judith Butler, and Suspicious Hope" in *Hypatia* (forthcoming Summer 2015). (amyrbillingsley@gmail.com)