

# Welcome to the conference *transgender studies and theories - building up the field in a Nordic context.*

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*As a welcoming address to the conference 'Transgender Studies and Theories – Building up the Field in a Nordic Context', the article discusses relations between the fields of Gender Studies and Transgender Studies. Following Judith Butler's critique of 'proper objects', the author warns against a construction of a binary between the study of 'gender' and the study of 'transgender'. She argues that Gender Studies and Transgender Studies should be seen as intra-acting and mutually transforming fields of enquiry which among others share an interest in trans-epistemologies, the construction of knowledge transgressive and transitional spaces. She ends with a comment to the autobiography of Christine Jorgensen whose MtF surgery hit the headlines of the world press in 1952, and to a family mystery which illustrates the problematic mix of silencing and sensationalism which for years characterized mainstream approaches to transgender issues.*

*Keywords: Transgender Studies, Gender Studies, trans-epistemologies, Christine Jorgensen's autobiography, 'proper' objects, transgender, transsexuals*

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In my capacity as Head of the Unit of Gender Studies, Linköping University, I am happy to wish you all a very warm welcome to the Unit and to the conference *Transgender Studies and Theories - Building up the Field in a Nordic Context*. I shall also use the opportunity to thank Katherine Harrison and Ulrica

Engdahl who have put lots of energy into the organizing of this conference. The conference has attracted transgender scholars from many countries and contexts, and I really hope and feel sure that its main aim – to boost the building up of the field of Transgender Studies in a Nordic Context - will be accomplished. The

overwhelming interest in the conference speaks for itself.

In particular, I am very happy that this event takes place as part of the activities of the Unit of Gender Studies. I think it is important to stress the importance of considering Transgender Studies and Gender Studies as intra-acting in the sense of the onto-epistemology of feminist theorist Karen Barad (2007). This implies that they should be seen as unbounded phenomena which mutually pervade and transform each other without necessarily collapsing into each other. According to this stance, Transgender Studies and Gender Studies should not be seen as separate entities 'properly' organized around different 'objects' of study ('gender', on the one hand, and 'transgender' on the other), but as fields of enquiry which share a profound interest in critical investigations of the diverse meanings and resignifications of sex/gender, gender transgressions, embodied subjectivities, gendered and sexualized power differentials and their intersections with other social and cultural axes of power (race, ethnicity, nationality, generation etc.). I agree very much with Judith Butler in her famous critique of the notion of 'proper objects' (Butler 1997). So even though I wholeheartedly embrace the emergence of critical Transgender Studies as an area of study that, according to the stated aims of this conference, should be recognized, supported and taken

seriously in a Nordic context (as well as in other contexts), I would at the same time firmly argue that Transgender Studies should not simply take off as an area of its own. In my opinion, it should unfold in a close and mutually enriching dialogue with Gender Studies. I would find it epistemologically and methodologically problematic to cut the two totally loose from each other, and construct the 'proper object' of Transgender Studies as gender transgressions and leave Gender Studies stuck with the heteronormative two-gender-model. Along these lines, I like very much seeing this conference unfold within the context of the Unit of Gender Studies, and I welcome and endorse the constructing of alliances within the context of a feminist critique of gendered oppressions as suggested by transgender scholar Stephen Whittle:

I wrote a few years back that 'gender' was an excuse for oppression.... Feminism is about a better set of values in which gender loses some of its power of oppression, in which separate and distinct voices are not only heard but also listened to, and in which a better set of values is followed. That is what we who are trans can gain from them – but perhaps more importantly now, it is also something we can give back to them (Whittle 2006, 202).

In addition to a shared critique

of gendered power differentials, I think it would be important also to explore further the issue of what I would call 'trans-epistemologies'. I share with many feminist scholars, interested in feminist epistemologies, a passion for the 'trans'-prefix as it emerges in concepts such as *transdisciplinary*, *transnational*, *translation*, *transversal* – and *transgender*. I am fascinated by the innovative dynamics to be generated by transdisciplinarity (Pryse 2000; Lykke 2010 and 2011); I believe in critical feminist transnational analyses (Caplan, Alarcón and Moallem 1999; Lykke 2004) which overcome the methodological nationalisms or problematic universalisms characterizing much current scholarship; I think it is important to focus on boundary-objects (Haraway 1991; Bowker and Star 1999) which may facilitate translations between different local contexts (disciplinary, geopolitical, national, historical etc.), and I am a believer in what feminist scholar Nira Yuval-Davis called transversal dialogues (1997). As a queerfeminist sex/gender scholar, I also have a passion for critical gender-transgressions and transgenderism. Methodologically, I think it is interesting to take these trans-epistemologies into analyses which locate themselves in transitional spaces – in between and beyond. The 'trans'-tool is apt for forging transition, movement, process, becoming. It is well suited for exploring and shifting boundaries.

It might be used as a tool for producing hope and change for what Stephen Whittle in the quote above calls 'a better set of values', where entities such as for example disciplines, nations and genders etc. lose their fixed and policed boundaries. Against this background, I think it would be very interesting to compare notes on similarities and differences between the ways in which the 'trans'-tool more specifically works in the intra-acting fields of Transgender Studies and Gender Studies. I hope the conference will be an arena for such comparisons.

A third reason for embracing the conference is the way in which Transgender Studies – in conjunction with Gender Studies - fosters critical knowledge and politically sustains and expands the right to do gender differently. To stress the latter point, I shall end this welcome speech with a personal anecdote. The anecdote is telling for the way in which transgender issues in my childhood and youth in the 1950s and 1960s were shrouded in a problematic mixture of public sensationalism and private silencing. But I think that it at the same time stresses mechanisms, which also may characterize a lot of current responses on the part of the majority population to transgender issues and practices which seem to threaten the 'good old' two-gender-model 'too much'.

The anecdote revolves around memories called forth by my recent

reading of the autobiography of Christine Jorgensen (1967/2000), whose MtF surgery hit the headlines of the world press in 1952. The reading triggered half-forgotten family memories and a line of reflections on them which I will share with you because they are pertinent for the conference theme.

As the story of Christine (George) Jorgensen may not be well known to everyone in the audience, I shall briefly retell it before entering my personal story. Christine Jorgensen was from the US, but, in order to get the MtF surgery she wanted, she had to go to Scandinavia, more particularly to my home country, Denmark. Here Christine met a medical doctor, the endocrinologist Christian Hamburger, head of Department of Endocrinology of Statens Serum Institut (a state driven medical institution in Copenhagen). Hamburger supported Christine in the decision to seek MtF-surgery. In the autobiography, Christine tells gratefully about his support which included finding a hospital and doctors who were willing to carry out the surgery as well as helping her getting new identity papers from the US Embassy, legally confirming her transition from male (George) to female (Christine) after the surgery. When Christine's case became public knowledge in 1952 (due to a leakage to the press by a member of the hospital staff where the surgery was undertaken), Hamburger became widely internationally known as a doctor who

would help transsexuals.

My personal relation to this iconic story is that I knew Hamburger, Christine's doctor, pretty well when I was a child and teenager. He was my stepfather's boss, and occasionally I and my family took part in social events with Hamburger and his wife. My stepfather was, like Hamburger, a medical doctor and an endocrinologist. Soon after his medical exam in the early 1950s, my stepfather got a job at the Department of Endocrinology at Statens Serum Institut in Copenhagen, a job which he stayed in until his death in 1975. At more or less the same time, in 1953 (when I was four years old), my stepfather and my mother married each other. I do not recall exactly when I first heard the story of Christine Jorgensen, but it was, indeed, many years before I became aware of the connection to Christian Hamburger and my stepfather's workplace. In fact, this latter connection did not become clear to me until I as part of my current research project on pro-sex feminism stumbled over Christine Jorgensen's autobiography in a feminist sex shop in New York.

The reading of the autobiography prompted me to see my stepfather in a somewhat new light. I never really liked him. He was rather patriarchal – a typical father of the 1950s who left all the care work to my mother who, like him, had a full time job as a medical doctor. Probably, I was also oedipally jealous of him:

by all means the guy courted my beloved mother whom I had had for myself until I was four years old. So in many ways I remember him as a rather annoying and disturbing person. But the reading of Christine Jorgensen's autobiography and the link to Christian Hamburger and my stepfather's workplace set new reflections in motion.

During the 1960s, my stepfather started drinking so heavily that he more or less jeopardised his medical career. It has always been somewhat obscure to me and to my little sister and brother why he ended up like this, but I do also believe that the life of parents will – and should – always include secrets which the children will never grasp. Nevertheless, a new perspective on this old family mystery came to my mind, when I read the Jorgensen-autobiography. I remembered how my stepfather, when he was drunk, liked to provoke our middle-class neighbourhood by walking up and down the suburban street where we lived wearing a wig that my mother had bought when she lost her hair due to cancer treatment. I think that the provocative act of publicly wearing a woman's wig gave my stepfather an ambivalent pleasure. He claimed to do it as an angry and ironic act of miming young men from the hippie and students' movements who by that time (end of the 1960s) had grown their hair long as a protest amongst others against the kind of hegemonic, middle class patriarchal family val-

ues which my step father cherished. Conservative as my step father was, he hated the flourishing hippie and youth movements, and the mimetic gesture of wearing a woman's wig was meant to show the youth how ridiculously he thought they performed. But, in retrospect, I see the gesture as more multi-layered than this. I tend to think that my step father's wig wearing should also be interpreted as his entering into a transitional space, where a transgressive mode of doing gender momentarily made it possible for him to escape the rigid narratives of hegemonic and patriarchal masculinity with which he was brought up, but which did not fit him too well. The wig wearing was a temporary move for my step father, and he never succeeded in going further beyond binary gender and hegemonic masculinity than these modest experiments with transgenderism even though he for years had been part of a workplace where transgenderism, in fact, was a public issue.

The personal moral of the story is this: had my step father gone further in his gender transgressions, I believe that he would have ended up as an overall much happier and less authoritarian person who I probably would have liked much better than the utterly bitter, angry and annoyed man I knew. The more general moral is that since the mentioned mixture of public sensationalism and private silencing of transgender issues which characterized the 1950s

and 1960s in many ways seem to be still alive and kicking today, it is to be hoped that the emergent field of critical Transgender Studies - in conjunction with Gender Studies - can contribute to a change for the better here.

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