

## Queers in the American City: Transgendered perceptions of urban space

PETRA L. DOAN

*Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the complex relationship between transgendered people and cities in the USA, and, in particular, their relationship with queer spaces within those cities. Some have argued that queer spaces occur at the margins of society and constitute a safe haven for LGBT oppressed by the hetero-normative nature of urban areas. Data from a survey of 149 transgendered individuals indicate that although queer spaces provide a measure of protection for gender variant people, the gendered nature of these spaces results in continued high levels of harassment and violence for this population. The author argues that the strongly gendered dimensions of these spaces suggests that a discursive re-visioning of gender is needed to create more transgender friendly urban spaces.*

**KEY WORDS:** Queer space; transgender; gender variant; urban safety

In recent years the term ‘queer’ has been transformed from an epithet to a theoretical construct referring to an anti-normative subject position with respect to sexuality (Jagose, 1996). Butler (1993) suggests that the word, queer, disrupts ‘natural’ dichotomies such as heterosexual/homosexual and gender/sex. Queer has also been adopted by the very people at whom the epithet has been directed as a reflexive strategy to turn away the power of this word to hurt. Furthermore, the intended targets of this word (people whose subject positions are not generally accepted, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and others who do not conform to generally accepted practices) have used this labeling to reclaim their identities and to empower their subject positions (Bell & Valentine, 1995). To ‘queer’ a city therefore means to implicitly recognize the hetero-normative nature of most urban spaces (Bell *et al.*, 1994) and through overt action create a safe place for people who identity as queer. Conceptually queer space occurs at the margin of society, a kind of ‘thirdspace’ or a Foucaultian heterotopia (Soja, 1996), but Rushbrook (2002) wonders whether this form of inclusive queer space exists only as a theoretical construct. These concerns with inclusivity are especially relevant for gender variant people and for transgendered individuals in particular.

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*Correspondence:* Petra Doan, Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Master’s Internationalist Program, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, 32306-2280, USA. E-mail: pdoan@garnet.acns.fsu.edu

The objective of this paper is to highlight this often neglected group and consider the nature of their perceptions of a variety of urban spaces. The paper begins with a brief exploration of the nature and social consequences of gender variance. The next section examines the gendered nature of gay and lesbian neighborhoods, and considers to what extent such areas allow individuals to express their gender in ways that may challenge socially expected gender dichotomy without fear of hetero-normative restrictions and approbation. The research then considers one highly stigmatized component of the gender variant community, those individuals who self identify as transgendered.<sup>1</sup> The second section of this paper shifts the focus to the transgendered population and uses data from a snowball survey of transgendered individuals to explore their perceptions of urban spaces, and in particular queer spaces. The final section examines the ways that transgender activists have developed discursive spaces for protest and for education about the full spectrum of gender variance. Although these actions have taken place in a variety of physical spaces, the protests themselves have not created permanent spaces but have demonstrated the transitory and fluid nature of gendered spaces.

### **Distinguishing Gender Variant and Transgender Populations**

Both anthropologists and transgender theorists have argued for some time that it is not helpful to view gender as a dichotomy. Jacobs & Cromwell (1992) review a range of anthropological evidence on gender variant individuals to critique the strongly hetero-normative expectation that gender expression and biological sex will be congruent. Rothblatt (1995) suggests that social norms surrounding gender constitute a virtual apartheid of sex. Although the legal definition of male and female is undefined, the distinction is required on numerous official documents, forcing individuals to adopt a dichotomous sexual position, even in the face of growing scientific evidence that intersex conditions are much more common than previously believed.<sup>2</sup> Within feminism there has been much debate about how to move beyond the gender dichotomy, but little consensus on how to achieve this objective. For instance, feminist psychologist Sandra Bem proposed 'psychological androgyny' in the early 1970s, but generated a firestorm of controversy, and most feminist theorists quickly backed away from the concept. In subsequent work Bem (1993) clarifies that it is the polarization of gender into a rigid dichotomy that must be removed to allow both men and women to express the full range of human possibility. Gender de-polarization would undermine the social reproduction of male power that thrives on the separation and segregation of the sexes and thereby would provide transgendered individuals greater freedom to express the range of their gender identity positions.

Gender variant individuals exist in a wide array of cultures and express their identities in ways that contravene expectations based on their biological sex. This diversity of expression includes men who express a more feminine aspect of themselves and women who express an overtly masculine manner. In particular, these individuals defy societal expectations for modes of dress and behavior that can and do vary considerably across cultures and across historical periods (Feinberg, 1996). Some gender variant individuals may also be gay or lesbian, including both butch lesbians and effeminate gay men.

Transgendered subject positions evolve when society fails to recognize that an individual's gender identity may be variant from anatomical sex at birth. The term

transgender has been appropriated by some gender variant individuals as an umbrella term referring to people who feel the need to contravene societal expectations and express a gender variant identity on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> These people include: cross-dressers, drag queens, drag kings, and pre-operative, post-operative, and non-operative transsexuals. In other young queer identified populations, new identity positions may be claimed using terms such as tranny-fag, boychik, and gender-queer. A critical distinction in this population is that the need to express this identity may have different levels of intensity (see Figure 1). This feeling may manifest itself as the need for a clear shift from male to female (MtF or trans women) or from female to male (FtM or trans men) or as a more intermittent cross-dressing. The frequency of these behaviors may vary from occasional gender bending to permanent decisions to express the deeply felt gender identity on a full-time basis. People who engage in intermittent acts of transgender expression are usually referred to as cross-dressers. This category may include men (usually gay) who perform as female impersonators (drag queens) or women (usually lesbian) who perform as male impersonators (drag kings). People who feel the need to live full time in their self-perceived gender are sometimes called transsexuals. Drag queens and drag kings may also be transsexual.

Those transgendered individuals who feel they must transition and fully embody a gender at variance with their anatomical sex face an assortment of other difficulties related to the physical changes. In many cases the decision to transition involves altering the body by using hormones and/or surgery. The total cost of these procedures for a MtF can be as high as \$25,000 and for an FtM can be from \$50,000 to \$100,000. In other cases some individuals (i.e. non-operative transsexuals) may choose non-invasive measures, but will nevertheless present outwardly as the gender with which they identify. Among trans men there is an additional distinction between those who have had 'top surgery' and those who have had 'bottom surgery'. During their transitional stage nearly all of these transgendered people remain rather obviously gender variant. MtF individuals (also known as trans women) are likely to be taller, have deeper voices, larger hands, and prominent Adam's apples than most women. FtM individuals

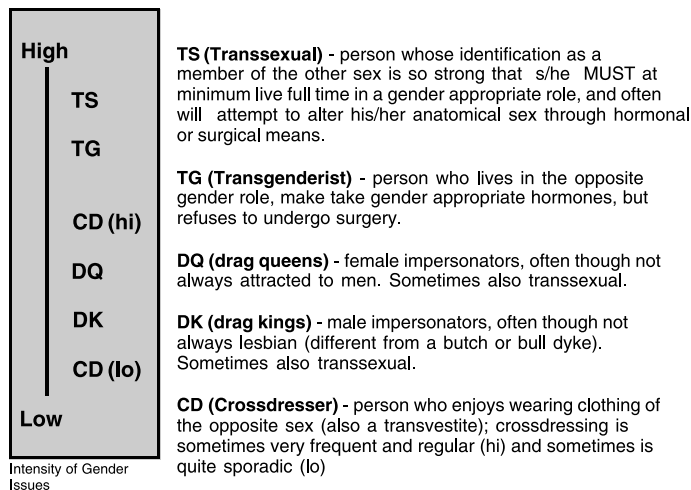


Figure 1. Types and intensity of gender identity.

**Table 1.** Estimates of queer population in a hypothetical city of one million

|  | United States<br>(DSM - IV, 1994) | Netherlands<br>(Bakker <i>et al.</i> , 1993) | Singapore<br>(Tsoi, 1988) | United States<br>(Conway, 2002) |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gay/Lesbian <sup>a</sup>                   | 100,000                           | 100,000                                      | 100,000                   | 100,000                         |
| Transsexuals                               | 43                                | 117  | 148                       |                                 |
| MtF (male to female)                       | 33                                | 84   | 111                       | 400                             |
| FtM (female to male)                       | 10                                | 33   | 37                        |                                 |
| Non-operative<br>transsexuals <sup>b</sup> | 43                                | 117  | 148                       | 400                             |
| Cross-dresser <sup>c</sup>                 | 10,000                            | 10,000                                       | 10,000                    | 10,000                          |
| Total transgender                          | 10,086                            | 10,234                                       | 10,296                    | 10,800                          |
| Total queer                                | 110,086                           | 110,234                                      | 110,296                   | 110,800                         |

<sup>a</sup> Gays and lesbians are generally assumed to be 10% of the population.

<sup>b</sup> Non-operative transsexuals are assumed to be roughly the same as transsexuals who have completed Gender Reassignment Surgery.

<sup>c</sup> Cross-dressers are generally assumed to be 1% of the population.

(also known as trans men) taking male hormones may be quite ‘passable’ as men after six months to a year (Rees, 1996), but are likely to be shorter, have smaller hands, and at least initially have higher voices than other men.

The high levels of social stigma attached to being gender variant make an assessment of the size of the trans population extraordinarily difficult. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, 1994) estimates that approximately one in 33,000 men and one in 100,000 women are transsexual (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). These statistics, however, have been questioned by a number of scholars. In the Netherlands, where transgender status is less highly stigmatized, the prevalence is estimated to be one per 11,900 males and one per 30,400 females (Bakker *et al.*, 1993). In Singapore the ratios appear to be even higher with one per 9,000 males and one per 27,000 females (Tsoi, 1988). Other scholars suggest a different estimation procedure to obtain a prevalence of one in 2,500 males who have undergone sexual reassignment surgery based on the number of surgeries performed on US citizens compared to the number of men in the potential age range (Conway, 2002). Obviously these numbers do not represent the entire range of transgendered population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many individuals may present to doctors initially as transsexual, but are either not approved for surgery or elect not to alter their bodies in this manner. Finally the size of the cross-dressing population is even harder to assess. Several estimates have placed the number of cross-dressers at approximately 1% of the population (Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Feinbloom, 1976), but these numbers are highly subjective, since this group remains extremely closeted. Table 1 presents an estimate of the trans population of a hypothetical city of one million people using these estimates.

### The Social Consequences of Transgressing Gender Norms

Individuals who transgress gender norms are likely to experience profound social consequences, including discrimination and outright violence. Mackenzie (1994) suggests that there are no safe social spaces for individuals who live outside the bipolar gender world. People who challenge gender norms can often trigger a virulent and usually violent response, which some have labeled gender bashing (Namaste, 1996). Gender theorist Riki Wilchins (2004) argues that

In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans were prepared to debate some degree of rights for gays, but they were actively hostile towards anything that smacked of genderqueerness. Mannish women and effeminate men remained as unpalatable as ever to mainstream America. (Wilchins, 2004, p. 16)

Most transgendered people are painfully aware that their visible transgression of gender norms makes them one of the most vulnerable and least protected communities in social space. The early socialization of trans men as girls makes them acutely aware of the swift retribution which would be their lot if they are 'discovered' as a trans. MtF individuals, although originally socialized as boys, are forced to learn the lesson of vulnerability within the city (Bockting *et al.*, 1998). Trans women who live full time as women have the same potential to be treated as 'targets' for harassment, abuse, potential street crime victims. Trans people who do not 'pass' and emerge in urban public spaces as visibly transgendered may evoke an even harsher reaction (Namaste, 1996; Witten & Eyster, 1999). A recent survey of 402 transgendered individuals from across the United States found that over half of this population had experienced some form of harassment or violence during their lifetime and a quarter had faced a potentially serious violent assault (Lombardi *et al.*, 2001). Kenagy (2005) cites two studies in the Philadelphia metropolitan area that indicate that 51% of the survey respondents had been physically abused and 56% had experienced violence within the home. In addition, the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition estimates that since 1990 there has been approximately one transgendered person killed each month, and since the year 2000 the number has been closer to two per month.<sup>4</sup> Because of the extreme vulnerability of this group, anti-trans violence might serve as an early warning system for deep-seated intolerance present in an urban area (Doan, 2001).

Another serious consequence of gender variance is the high levels of social stigma attached to transgressing norms of gender presentation. A recent public health survey found that transgender related health issues were severely 'under-studied' (Boehmer, 2002) and while the American Public Health Association (1999) has issued a public position statement about the special needs of transgendered people, until these recommendations are widely implemented by practitioners, there will continue to be a large gap in the availability of quality health care. The internalization of this stigma means that suicides and attempted suicides are common among transgendered individuals. Statistics on the incidence of suicide within this population are not definitive because of the tendency not to report transgender status as a cause, or to report transgendered individuals in the same category as gay or lesbian. However, studies of transgendered individuals suggest that the suicidal ideation rate is as high as 35% (Xavier, 2000) and as many as 30% have actually attempted suicide (Kenagy, 2005; Pfafflin & Junge, 1992; Stuart, 1991; Van Kesteren, 1997). These health-related problems may cause trans men and women to feel uncared for and less welcome in cities.

Unorthodox gender presentation also makes it difficult for some individuals to find or maintain gainful employment. Because the appearance of gender is not protected by most anti-discrimination ordinances, even highly skilled trans people can be fired from their jobs and become unemployed. Desperate for income, some transgendered individuals seek work on the street, and are at risk from substance abuse, unprotected sexual experiences, and various mental health problems (Cochran *et al.*, 2002). Urban areas like the Tenderloin in San Francisco

can become a focal point for young transgendered people, who may only find work as prostitutes (Stryker, 2004; Weinberg *et al.*, 1999). Those individuals who struggle to make ends meet as a result of this discrimination are likely to feel less protected in cities.

### The Gendered Nature of Queer Space

It is not just society at large that has rigid expectations of appropriately gendered behavior. Many individuals within the gay and lesbian (G/L) community have internalized these same gender role assumptions in their desire to assimilate into the wider population. This is ironic because prior to the 1969 Stonewall revolution flouting gender norms was one method of signifying queerness. Within the gay community female impersonators have long been a highly visible expression of queerness and were mostly tolerated by the gay community as long as their presentation was clearly a performance and limited to certain venues. Drag shows were popular events in gay bars and patrons of lesbian bars were frequently divided into the 'butches' and the 'femmes'.

Perhaps as a result of this playing with gender, many people outside of the queer community began to assume that gender variance was an infallible indicator of homosexuality. Because of this continuing misperception, hate crimes are often triggered by gender variant behavior whether or not the person is gay, lesbian, or transgendered. After Stonewall and the rise of political 'liberation' movements, many gay and lesbian activists wished to present themselves as 'normal' except for their selection of partners. As a result, gay and lesbian communities put much greater emphasis on gender normality. Faderman (1991) suggests that during the 1960s and 1970s the most obviously gender variant women, especially the most overtly butch and femme women, were pressured to adopt dress and behaviors more acceptable to society. During this period many lesbians adopted a casual attire of jeans and a flannel shirt, that is neither terribly butch or femme. Others have described tensions within the lesbian community over the highly gendered subject positions of butches and femmes, with the latter being seen by some people as lipstick lesbians and often not 'real' lesbians (Harris & Crocker, 1997). Within the gay community gender non-conformity also began to be suppressed and overtly effeminate men were often marginalized (Taywaditep, 2001). Many gay men have adopted a more uniformly 'masculine' persona (short hair, developed muscles, and tight clothes).

These same attitudes are evident in the development of queer spaces in North American cities after Stonewall. Early studies of gay male spaces focused on gay men's interest in dominating urban territory (Castells, 1983) and stimulating neighborhood gentrification (Lauria & Knopp, 1985). Today in most overtly gay spaces there is little to no visible gender queerness or any indication that such variance is tolerated. Even in San Francisco's Castro District, often considered the archetype of queer space, the streets are filled with well muscled men and even the window displays are masculinely gendered. Other spaces such as Chicago's Boys Town uses what Nast (2002) has described as 'phallic rimming' of the main street (North Halsted St.) with metallic pillars topped by rainbow-colored rings. Both through its name and in its most visible symbols this area is also clearly masculinized. Philadelphia's queer space uses a similarly masculinist play on words, to call itself the Gayborhood.

Lesbian spaces are less explicitly gendered and less visible for a variety of reasons. Adler & Brenner (1993) suggest that lower incomes among lesbians make it

difficult to invest in houses at the same rate as gay men. Furthermore, women are more likely to have custody of children which shifts their residential location choice towards areas with more attractive schools and other neighborhood amenities. This tendency to locate in more traditional suburban areas can be problematic because lesbians are particularly sensitive to the heterosexing of urban spaces (Valentine, 1993). As a result some lesbians have clustered in smaller towns in places like Northampton, Massachusetts (Forsyth, 1997a) and Asheville, North Carolina (Brown, 1999). Others have suggested that lesbian identity is often written on the bodies of lesbians through clothing choice, hair style, or other accessories, but not on the built environment (Peace, 2001). As a result, lesbians may use symbols like pinkie rings, labris earrings, rainbows, or simply an overt gaze to signify spaces and to quietly proclaim an identity for themselves (Valentine, 1996). This subtlety means that lesbian neighborhoods are not as visible as overtly gay areas, but comprise communities of like-minded women who blend into the built environment (Wolfe, 1997). Some lesbian social spaces such as Park Slope in Brooklyn do not have a physical commercial center (Rothenberg, 1995), but in other areas, such as Northampton, lesbians may be important though less visible business owners within urban commercial areas (Forsyth, 1997b).

The suggestion that 'queer space' might be a more inclusive conceptual alternative to the hetero-normative nature of most urban spaces (Bell *et al.*, 1994; Bell & Valentine, 1995; Betsky, 1997; Ingram *et al.*, 1997) does not appear to have lived up to its radical and more inclusive vision. Gender queer people are generally only visible in such spaces during special occasions like Halloween or during Dyke marches and Pride Parades. The commodification of gay space by the patriarchal institutions that remain in control of post-industrial society (Nast, 2002) leaves little space for women (Valentine, 2000), resulting in lesbian areas that are not distinct, but are blended into otherwise bohemian neighborhoods which can be called 'spaces of difference' (Podmore, 2001). Most queer spaces have been unable to accommodate alternative subject positions such as bisexuality (Hemmings, 2002) and non-traditional gender presentations within these communities, leaving these individuals vulnerable and invisible in public spaces (Namaste, 2000).

A rigid adherence to a dichotomous view of gender has resulted in a silencing of transgendered voices, particularly in academic discourse, but also within feminist and lesbian communities (Whittle, 1996). For instance, the geographic literature dealing with sexuality and space deals with heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians, but has been silent on both bisexuals (Hemmings, 2002) and the transgendered (Namaste, 2001). The construction of the term 'womyn-born-womyn' was a result of this discrimination and has been implemented at events like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) (Meyerowitz, 2002), touching off a cascade of protest (more below). Taylor (1998) recounts a similar attempt to limit Sydney's Lesbian Space Project to female-born-lesbians only, which split the lesbian community and ultimately stalled the proposed construction project. Stone (1991) argues that transsexuals' need to pass is a function of the dominant culture's fixation on dichotomous gender, and calls for a post-transsexual manifesto in which trans people will lead the way to a fundamental reconception of gender. Bornstein (1994) extends this conception and suggests that there are not just two genders but as many as a thousand different genders only limited by our imagination. The power of reconceptualizing gender lies in the fact that 'to be fluid in one's gender challenges the oppressive process of gender and power processes which use gender to maintain power structures' (Whittle, 1996, p. 210). This call for new and more explicitly

visible ways to express the full spectrum of gender variance is echoed by Feinberg (1996), Green (2004), Namaste (2000), and Wilchins (2004). The difficulty is how to achieve these changes in the face of such discrimination without access to the physical spaces needed to make these challenges visible.

### **Transgendered Perceptions of Urban Spaces**

In order to examine the ways that transgendered individuals perceive urban spaces, it is critical to understand the role that queer spaces play as an entry point into the city for many trans people, even though there is very little public trans or gender variant presence in most of these areas. Nevertheless, it is on the fringes of the queer community that a person who is coming to terms with his or her transgendered identity is able to explore a different gender within the confines of that relatively safe space. These initial impressions are important in shaping the ways in which the city is viewed even long after transition. It is therefore useful to turn to the transgendered populations themselves and assess their perceptions of urban spaces as well as their level of connectedness with queer community spaces.

A snowball survey of 149 transgendered individuals was conducted to explore the trans perceptions of the urban areas in which they live, work, and play, as well as their level of connections to supposedly queer areas. The survey instrument was designed by the author and was primarily circulated at two major gender conferences (the Southern Comfort Convention held in Atlanta in fall 2000 and the Fourth International Congress on Cross-dressing, Sex, and Gender held in Philadelphia in spring 2001). Survey respondents were encouraged to distribute this instrument widely in the form of a snowball technique to a variety of transgender support groups<sup>5</sup>). These conferences draw from a broad national audience, and the sample includes individuals from 29 states and four overseas countries. However, because the Southern Comfort Convention occurs each year in Atlanta, there are more respondents from Atlanta and several other southeastern cities than would have been expected in a random survey design. After some descriptive detail about the survey respondents, the analysis will focus on those survey questions which asked this population about their experiences in the city and with any queer spaces in their city.

Except for their gender non-conformity, this population is a stable and well educated group of middle-aged individuals with an average age of 46 years. Most of the respondents are employed full time (68%), although some are working part-time (11%), others are retired (11%), and a few are students (5%). The most important occupational category in the group is professionals (38%), with others in managerial positions (14%), self-employed (15%), and skilled manual labor (13%). The sample also includes smaller numbers of clerical and household workers. The respondents are evenly divided in their education levels with roughly one-third having a high school degree, one-third a BA or BS and one-third having a graduate degree.

The sample spans a range of gender identities including: 43 MtF cross-dressers (29%), 80 MtF transsexuals (54%), and 26 FtMs in various stages of transition (17%). Approximately 31% have no plans to transition, 39% are getting ready to change genders, and 29% are living full-time in their appropriate gender. Table 2 describes the gender identity and residential location patterns revealed by the survey. 99 (69.4%) of respondents lived either downtown or in traditional suburbs of metropolitan areas. The rest lived in outlying or peripheral areas which included smaller communities outside the metropolitan region as well as rural areas. It is interesting to note that trans men (FtM) are more likely to live

**Table 2.** Residence location by gender identity

|           | MtF CD     | MtF TS     | FtM both   | TOTAL      |
|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Downtown  | 6 (14.0%)  | 10 (12.5%) | 7 (26.9%)  | 23 (15.4%) |
| Suburbs   | 25 (58.1%) | 41 (51.3%) | 10 (38.5%) | 76 (51.0%) |
| Periphery | 10 (23.2%) | 27 (33.8%) | 6 (23.3%)  | 43 (28.9%) |
| TOTAL     | 43 (100%)  | 80 (100%)  | 26 (100%)  | 149        |

downtown and less likely to live in the suburbs than other trans people, though the smaller numbers for this sub-group make broader generalizations difficult. Cross-dressers (MtF CD) are the most likely to live in the suburbs, which follows logically since most of these individuals are not ‘out’ and thus live apparently normal lives like the majority of Americans (i.e. in the suburbs). It is somewhat surprising then that those who identify as MtF transsexuals (MtF TS) also tend to live in the suburbs rather than in downtown areas, since this group as a whole tends to be the most visibly gender variant of the three identity groups. One possible explanation for the residential patterns of MtF TS is that they may have established residency in a neighborhood prior to transition and may be reluctant to move away from friends and family.

Because of the social stigmas detailed above, the survey asked respondents about specific experiences of harassment they had experienced over the past year. Table 3 presents the rather disturbing evidence that roughly one-third of all respondents have experienced some form of blatant staring within the past year. When trans people experience a hostile glare, it is clear that they have been singled out by a disquieting use of the hetero-normative gaze. Somewhat fewer (22%) had experienced hostile verbal comments, and even fewer had experienced physical harassment (17%), but these percentages vary by gender identity. Cross-dressers were most likely to be stared at (38%), MtF transsexuals were most likely to be verbally harassed (25%), and trans men were most likely to be physically harassed (19%). These numbers indicate that fears on the part of transgender populations about safety in urban areas are well founded. Physical safety remains an urgent concern for this highly vulnerable section of the population.

Table 4 reports the perceptions of respondents about the safety of their city for Lesbian Gay Bisexual (LGB) people. A second question asked respondents about their perceptions of the safety of their city for trans people. Not surprisingly, these data indicate that respondents felt that their cities were less safe for the trans population than the LGB population. A more interesting aspect of these perceptions is the way that they vary when queer neighborhoods are included. When transgendered perceptions of safety were cross-tabulated with the presence of an identifiable queer neighborhood, a chi square test indicated that there is a significant relationship. If a city has a visibly queer area, trans people feel markedly safer than they would in cities without such queer centers. This is true even though most of the respondents only visit these spaces on an occasional

**Table 3.** Have you felt threatened in your city during the last year?

|                     | MtF CD |       | MtF TS |       | FtM both |       | TOTAL |       |
|---------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| Hostile stares      | 16     | 38.1% | 26     | 32.9% | 6        | 23.1% | 48    | 32.7% |
| Hostile comments    | 7      | 17.1% | 20     | 25.0% | 5        | 19.2% | 32    | 21.8% |
| Physical harassment | 6      | 14.6% | 14     | 17.7% | 5        | 19.2% | 25    | 17.1% |

**Table 4.** Perceptions of urban safety by presence of a queer neighborhood

|  |           | City has a queer area |          | TOTAL |
|--|-----------|-----------------------|----------|-------|
|  |           | No                    | Yes      |       |
| How safe is your city for Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals? | Unsafe    | 14 (16%)              | 1 (2%)   | 15    |
|  | Tolerable | 47 (55%)              | 19 (31%) | 66    |
|  | Good      | 25 (29%)              | 41 (67%) | 66    |
| How safe is your city for Transgendered people?          | Unsafe    | 18 (21%)              | 3 (5%)   | 21    |
|  | Tolerable | 44 (52%)              | 26 (42%) | 70    |
|  | Good      | 23 (27%)              | 32 (53%) | 55    |

basis. Perhaps queer spaces provide some form of a psychologically protective umbrella for transgendered people, because such spaces do tolerate intermittent acts of gender experimentation.

Trans people in the early stages of their coming out process and who are experimenting with new ways to present their gender are likely to seek out a support group which often will meet in a Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community center or equivalent welcoming institution. It is through this initial interaction that a relationship is built with the wider LGBT community. Further examination of the survey data reinforces this trend. Seventy-seven respondents said that either they or members of their trans support group participated in LGBT community events, such as Pride Parades. Furthermore, 62% of the respondents indicated that they had visited an LGBT oriented institution (bar, bookstore, community center, etc.) at least one time over the past year, and 42% had done so more than three times. Table 5 provides examples of the survey respondents' perceptions of their connections to the LGBT community and to queer areas. It is interesting that much larger proportions of transsexuals (both MtF and FtM) report belonging to support groups than other members of the trans community and also that their group actively participates in LGBT community events. Clearly there are a variety of connections between the trans community and the wider LGBT community.

Respondents were also asked about whether their city had an identifiable queer neighborhood. Nearly half the respondents (44%) indicated that their city did

**Table 5.** Transgender community connections to the queer community

|   |     | MtF CD | MtF TS | FtM both | TOTAL |
|---|-----|--------|--------|----------|-------|
| Do you have a gender support group?                 | No  | 7      | 24     | 11       | 42    |
|   | Yes | 35     | 56     | 15       | 106   |
| Does your group attend LGBT events?                 | No  | 7      | 8      | 2        | 17    |
|   | Yes | 23     | 43     | 11       | 77    |
| Is there a visible Gay & Lesbian Area in your city? | No  | 29     | 46     | 13       | 88    |
|   | Yes | 14     | 24     | 13       | 61    |
| Do you live in the Gay & Lesbian area?              | No  | 43     | 75     | 25       | 143   |
|   | Yes | 0      | 5      | 1        | 6     |

have a queer-identified area, however only six respondents (4%) actually lived in one of those areas. When they asked why they did not live in such neighborhoods the most frequent responses were that it was too expensive (16), the convenience of suburban or small town amenities (9), proximity to work at the edge of the urban periphery (4), and being near school districts and other child-oriented amenities (3). Although the queer communities provide some support to transgendered individuals in the early phases of exploration and transition, visibly queer neighborhoods do not serve the residential needs of this population. So how can trans people organize to ensure their own safety?

### **Creating Gender Friendly Queer Spaces**

Both MtF and FtM transgendered people share a common thread with women in their experience of space as inherently gender biased. Feminist scholars have shown that urban spaces which have been designed and built largely by men can be quite unsafe for women (Valentine, 1989; Pain, 1991; Peake, 1993; Day, 1999). This male domination of urban public spaces can lead to verbal harassment, physical abuse, and other forms of discrimination. Urban safety issues have often been catalysts for the women's movement and have stimulated a variety of activist responses to changing the built environment including: organizing 'Take Back the Night' marches, and lobbying for more police protection, installing better lighting, and demanding more humane treatment for female victims of rape and abuse. For women changing the built environment first required changes in underlying social institutions.

The transgendered community has had to learn this lesson as well. The transgendered are also vulnerable to male violence, but their small numbers mean that protecting this uniquely vulnerable population is rarely on anyone's political agenda. Since the early 1990s this population has begun to make changes to the way that gender variance is perceived by the wider population in order to begin making their own claims on urban spaces. The first steps have been to create discursive spaces that are welcoming of the full range of gendered subject positions. The trans population has developed a number of strategies for organizing and creating such spaces even if they are only temporary. Because transgendered populations are relatively small, it is unlikely that there would ever be enough trans people in one area to establish a 'transgender' enclave similar to the established gay and lesbian areas in larger cities. However, in the past 15 years the availability of information on the internet has opened up many doors for trans people who might otherwise have never communicated with anyone like themselves. The possibility of establishing an 'on-line support' community which is 'non-spatial' in nature has been extremely helpful for many newer trans people (Whittle, 2002). The growing use of computer based communication has seen a huge increase in the creation of online communities, at first through bulletin board groups, and then virtual chat rooms, world wide web sites and an ever expanding list of electronic mail list servers that proliferates in cyberspace. These venues for sharing information, exchanging personal stories, and for online organizing have transformed communications between dispersed individuals and allowed the transgender community to begin organizing in new ways.

The first step for many trans people in coming out and making contact is often attendance at a local support group (Gagné *et al.*, 1997), whose existence may be explored initially through the anonymity of email. Face to face meetings in a safe,

almost always extremely private environment sometimes follow the initial electronic contact. Local support group meetings sometimes venture out into the more public private spaces of shopping malls and gay clubs, but these are perceived as too risky by many members. The full extent of this larger community is not really evident until the individual attends one of the many transgender conventions that occur throughout the country. At these meetings hundreds of participants may gather at standard convention oriented facilities and establish a mostly public presence for a splendid array of gender identity positions for periods of up to a week.

The Fantasia Fair Gathering in Provincetown, Massachusetts is the grandmother of these gatherings, and has been meeting since the 1980s. The safety of this very gay friendly town helps to encourage fearful first timers to participate, and the placement of the convention at the very end of tourist season ensures that there will be few other tourists around to make a fuss. In contrast, the Southern Comfort Convention occurs each September in the heart of downtown Atlanta and creates transgender friendly safe spaces in several major hotels. While the safety created in these urban spaces is temporary, the effect of the opportunity for convention attendees to express openly what have previously been only private gender identity positions is quite powerful. The empowering effect of experiencing urban public spaces within a supportive context sometimes results in attenders making life changing decisions to be more open about their gender identity upon returning home.

For some transgender individuals these connections with a wider community have resulted in significant public activism. Most recent trans activism has occurred in the aftermath of the wave of queer activism surrounding the AIDS crisis.

The first transgender activist group to embrace the new queer politics was Transgender Nation, founded in 1992 as an offshoot of Queer Nation's San Francisco chapter. Transgender Nation noisily dragged transgender issues to the forefront of San Francisco's queer community, and at the local level successfully integrated transgender concerns with the political agendas of lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists to forge a truly inclusive *glbtq* [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer] community. Transgender Nation organized a media-grabbing protest at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association to call attention to the official pathologization of transgender phenomena. (Stryker, 2004, p. 3)

Another example of trans activism is the formation of Camp Trans outside the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. In 1991 Nancy Burkholder, an MtF transsexual woman, was ejected from the MWMF because she was not a womyn-born womyn (Meyerowitz, 2002). This exclusionary policy sparked a new chapter of organized trans activism, in which transsexual protesters calling themselves Camp Trans took over a piece of land adjacent to the MWMF gates to protest the exclusion of trans women and to educate festival attenders about trans issues. The stated purpose of Camp Trans was 'to promote an understanding of gender from a variety of perspectives and to address issues of disenfranchisement in the women's and lesbian communities' (Koyami, n.d.). The attenders at the first Camp Trans included an impressive array of trans activists and supporters including: Riki Wilchins, Leslie

Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and James Green. In subsequent years other Camps have continued to make this protest an annual event with the support of allies such as the Lesbian Avengers.

Several of the participants of the original Camp Trans formed a group called the Transexual Menace which protested anti-trans violence and the exclusion of transgender individuals from various groups and physical spaces. The first action undertaken by the Menace was a protest against transgender exclusion from the Pride March on the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. As Riki Wilchins, one of the group's founders, describes the organization,

The Menace does not carry out hostile actions: never has, never will. We ARE primarily interested in showing up to EDUCATE and INFORM their staff and volunteers, their donors, and the queer community at large... maybe these aren't your tactics, maybe they aren't your experience. But the motto 'Confront with Love' has served us very well now for almost 2 years of demos and we will continue to use it to guide our actions in the future. (Wilchins, n.d.)

The Menace organized powerful public protests after the murders of prominent transgender individuals. For instance, in May of 1995 roughly 40 people from across North America came to Falls City, Nebraska to hold a vigil in memory of Brandon Teena<sup>6</sup> during the trial of one of the men accused of murdering him. The next year over 40 gender activists demonstrated in front of the office of Washington DC's Mayor Marion Barry, calling for a full investigation into Tyra Hunter's death.<sup>7</sup> This activism helped to stimulate an awareness campaign by other trans activists about the high trans murder rate which resulted in memorial services held in hundreds of cities across North America each year in November.

In addition, in 1995 several members of the Menace attended the annual convention of the National Organization of Women and worked for the passage of a resolution that called for the de-pathologization of Gender Identity Disorder in the DSM-IV and also the right to medical care 'on-demand' for all people to achieve and maintain their own expression of gendered identity. Subsequent protests occurred jointly with the InterSex Society of North America protesting genital mutilation of inter-sexed babies at the American Medical Association Conference.

Finally there is ongoing political work to ensure safety from various forms of discrimination at the local level since trans issues have been historically neglected (Currah *et al.*, 2000). To address these problems the transgender community has created several political action organizations to lobby for change in Washington DC and in state capitals around the United States. There are annual Gender Lobby Days where as many as 100 trans and gender queer activists have shown up in Washington DC to visit Congress and press for legislative understanding of transgender issues and the broader issue of gender variance. Of the 32 states that have passed hate crimes legislation including sexual orientation, only 10 states also include gender identity issues. Of the 235 cities, counties, or other local governments that have passed some form of civil rights protection on the basis of sexual orientation, only 52 of these have also included gender identity (National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, n.d.). The presence of articulate and persistent gender variant individuals on Capitol Hill is a significant step forward, but much work remains to ensure equitable treatment and safe urban spaces.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has argued that the rush to celebrate some urban areas as inclusive queer spaces is premature, particularly with respect to gender variant individuals. The diversely gendered subjectivities of gender variant individuals challenge deeply held gender expectations of both gay and straight populations. As a result these transgendered and gender queer people often serve as virtual lightning rods for intolerance, discrimination, and oppression.

Existing queer spaces are mostly composed of gay and lesbian residential, and in some cases, commercial areas, which replicate a strongly hetero-normative gender dichotomy. In many areas progress has been made in the form of adding a 'T' for transgendered to the names of community institutions. But this is just a first step in a longer term agenda of re-visioning gender into a rainbow of identity positions and challenging the oppressive processes of gender used to maintain power structures.

While trans people do take advantage of the safety of the LGBT umbrella for support groups and occasional social excursions, only rarely do such places satisfy their residential needs. The transgendered are too small a proportion of the entire queer population to effectively form concentrations, much less neighborhoods themselves. As a result the trans community has explored a variety of ways to create discursive spaces that are welcoming of the full range of gendered subject positions, including: on-line chat rooms and list serves, annual conventions, periodic public protests, and regular political lobbying. These activities are important community building steps, and are likely to have lasting effects on the ways that gender variance is perceived by the rest of society. However, in order to achieve such long term changes it is important to increase the visibility of gender variance in the physical spaces of urban areas as well as the discursive spaces in which they have been successful to date.

The increasing level of activism has made individual queer spaces somewhat more gender friendly, but there is much more to do. Although there is a slowly increasing tolerance for more visibly identifiable gay and lesbian couples within many cities, acceptance of visible trans people is lagging far behind. Planning implications for LGBT populations have begun to surface (Forsyth, 2001), but these are sometimes viewed as one more minority population making claims for special treatment. Broader linkages to urban safety issues need to be established. If public spaces, parks, streets, shopping areas do not feel safe to one segment of society, can that space be truly safe for other minority groups? Cities and urban spaces that have experienced incidents of gender bashing are likely to be experiencing a broader range of intolerant behaviors that are likely to affect a much wider population. Progressive citizens and urban activists of all types need to make extra efforts to understand this poorly understood segment of the population because ensuring their safety will make the city a safer place for all people.

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## Notes

1. The 'T' for transgender was the last letter of the LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) alphabet soup to be added to most queer community institutions, and remains less well understood than other forms of gender variance.
2. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) suggests that 1.7 of every 100 babies is born with some form of an intersex condition.
3. It may be useful at this point to acknowledge the author's subject position as a post-operative trans woman who identifies as a lesbian feminist embodying many of the visible markers of gender variance (including a six foot physical frame, large hands, and a resonantly deep bass voice) with little concern to 'pass' as anything other than herself.
4. NTAC's web site is located at: <http://www.ntac.org> N.B. This site draws heavily on an earlier web site created by Gwendolyn Ann Smith, called 'Remembering Our Dead' located at <http://www.gender.org/remember>.
5. This snowball sampling strategy is frequently used to assess difficult to locate populations. In this case the population sampled did not include several visible but hard to pin down trans populations—female impersonators and transgendered sex workers. Therefore the author was not able to generalize these findings to the lower income transgendered population. In addition the sample is skewed towards trans women (123) vs. trans men (26).
6. Brandon Teena was a female-to-male transsexual who was raped and later brutally murdered in 1994. Several films have been made about this case, including *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry*.
7. Tyra Hunter was a transgendered woman fatally injured in a car crash in Washington DC in August 1995. During the course of their treatment the paramedics cut away her clothes and discovered her male genitalia. At this point they began laughing, addressed the patient with slurs, and stopped treating their patient while she laying dying on the sidewalk. Subsequently a jury awarded Ms. Hunter's mother \$2.8 million in punitive damages for this egregious treatment

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**ABSTRACT TRANSLATION**

**Los queers en la ciudad americana: las percepciones transgenerizados de los espacios urbanos**

**RESUMEN** Éste papel explora las relaciones complejas entre gente transgenerizada y ciudades en los Estados Unidos, y en particular, sus relaciones con espacios queer en éstas ciudades. Algunos han argumentado que los espacios queer existen en los márgenes de la sociedad y constituyen un refugio seguro para la gente lesbiana, gay, bisexual o transgenerizada que es oprimido por el carácter hetero-normativo de áreas urbanas. El resultado de una encuesta con 149 individuos transgenerizados indica que aunque estos espacios hace una medida de protección limitada para gente de variante género, el carácter generizado de éstos espacios tienen todavía como resultado niveles altos de acoso y violencia contra ésta gente. La autora argumenta que las dimensiones generizadas fuertes de éstos espacios sugieren que se necesite una modificación discursiva de género para crear espacios urbanos más amistoso para gente transgenerizada

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Espacio queer; transgénero; variante de género; la seguridad urbana

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