

Transition

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In the late twentieth century, *transition* became the vernacular term of choice in anglophone North America for describing the process or experience of changing gender. Initially, “transition” denoted a standardized trajectory of “sex reassignment” in which people were shuttled from the psychiatrist, through the endocrinologist, to the surgeon, to the judge (Cooke 1998; Rubin 2003). While any individual element of this sequence may be passionately desired, its trajectory through batteries of expert gatekeepers can be alienating even for those who most closely conform to those experts’ standards. The sequence itself materializes the discomfiting biopolitical requirement that trans-people must literally embody a particular set of psychiatric perspectives and medical practices.

Transition thus weighs especially heavily on people who lack the resources or the wish to conform to its polarized definitions of sexed embodiment, such as poor and/or uninsured people and those whose gender expression is not formed in relation to dominant white European American conventions. This is why many North American trans- communities insist that “everyone transitions in their own way”: open-ended refusal to define “transition” is a principled stance against institutionalizing any given form of trans- being. Such resistance reflects decades of struggle over who decides what counts as legitimate trans-/gender expression — struggle that clings to the word itself.

Despite its affective complexity and political freight, “transition” is frequently deployed to refer to the ways in which people move across socially defined boundaries away from an unchosen gender category. Such actions, and the language denoting them, have varied over time and place. For instance, in the nineteenth-century US West, people “assumed the dress” of their preferred gender (Boag 2011). In the mid-twentieth century, one had “the operation” that accomplished a “sex change.” Late 1960s San Francisco queens “came out,” submerging references to specific strategies in a wider celebration of social emergence as a member of one’s chosen sex while echoing the self-affirmative language of gay liberation (Cooke 1998). “Transition” became widely used only in the mid-1990s. “Transition” differs from “sex change” in its inherent reference to duration rather than event, from “assuming a dress” in its attention to the embodied self who dresses, and from “coming out” in its disengagement from politically radical and

street subcultures; yet conceptual residue from these earlier vocabularies adheres to the term as the activities it encompasses expand. Thus in common usage, “transition” conjoins expectations of ongoing, indeterminate process with expectations of eventual arrival and implies some shift in bodily self-presentation that is both central to, and inadequate to describe, the interpersonal/psychic experience of altering one’s social gender.

Multiple technical definitions of *transition* preexisted the word’s application to gender, and we might well consider how the resonances of these earlier usages could perhaps linger in the new transgender context. In rhetoric, transitions function as the ramps and bridges over which audiences are guided from one point to the next; they are evaluated as successful when our presentation seamlessly supports our claims, weak when the seams show. In physics, transition refers to a state of matter in which different phases of the same substance (as solid, liquid, or gas) achieve a temporary, unstable equilibrium that allows them to coexist. In dance, transitions are strategies for redirecting embodied energies; they can change the quality or the direction of movement, increase or decrease momentum, cover space, and/or occupy time. In parturition, transition names the shift from active labor to pushing the baby out. Transitions are brave work. Like birth, like writing, gender transition is when hopes take material form and in doing so take on a life of their own.

Transition is a list of trial names on the fridge, initials doodled on notepads. It is wearing a dress every day for a year, even though you imagine yourself as a rocker chick in torn jeans. It is searching for your name and photograph on your company’s website so you can compile a list to send through HR to the IT people who will, you hope, be consistent about updating them. It is borrowing your brother’s clothes. Transition is a misnomer because you were here, like this, all along. Transition is calling 911 before you cut off your dick so they can get you to the hospital before you bleed out. It is never having to reassure an embarrassed checkout clerk again. It is when you stop—or maybe start—avoiding mirrors, and bathrooms. It is like being slowly flayed in public. It is a rush of romantic feeling when you touch your own skin. Transition is a revised interface with agents of the security state. Transition is your secret self made available for social relationships.

Transition is thousands of little gestures of protest and presence, adding up and getting some momentum behind them so that you finally achieve escape velocity from the category you were stuck in all those years ago. But how do you know when you have arrived? “Transition” is not like “the operation” in this sense, though “the operation” often serves as an imagined conclusion. At some point, for many people, changes become less pronounced, less socially and affectively intense. We may stop celebrating every sign of our revised movement in the world. We are on the other side. Still when we pass, if we are unlucky in our relatives,

we may be buried in clothes and under a name that suit someone else's idea of authentic gender, and none of us control how we are remembered. When we are not aware of the days getting longer, have the seasons stopped changing? This is the promise of transition, as the term continues to expand from its psychiatric and surgical usage: that we can live in the time of our own becoming and that possible change is not restricted to the narrow sphere of our conscious intention.

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Translatinas/os

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The neologism *translatinas/os* is of recent coinage and has been employed to identify transgender, transsexual, and transvestite individuals in Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America and elsewhere.¹ The term brings together the prefix *trans-* and the noun *Latina/o*, employed as a gender-inflected synonym for Latin American or as an ethnic or racial marker for a person of Latin American descent who lives elsewhere, for example in Australia, Canada, Europe, or the United States. Given that the prefix *trans-* is used to indicate individuals who might have migrated (or whose family histories might include migration) and who might have transnational connections, it acquires a double valence, referring