

A Possible Cripistemology of the Queer: Modes of Dismantling "Ability" and "Heterosexuality" in Transgender Autobiographies

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Based on A. Revathi's The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life-Story (2010) and Kate Bornstein's A Queer and Pleasant Danger (2012), the paper explores the possible connections that arise between the two autobiographies while articulating the similar praxis of living beyond gender norms, though in very distinctive cultural contexts. The comparability of the texts provides grounds to construe "queer" and "disability" in the transsexual experiences as symptomatic but not solely based on the common negation of "compulsory heterosexuality" and "compulsory able-bodiedness" as imposed social constructs. The process of "transgendering" (Ekins and King 34) as initiated by the sense of disability/queerness of being in the "wrong body" is also explored through the study of the narratives. Both Revathi and Bornstein are affected by an innate desire for a "feminine" form of existence as well as the social injunction of following the dictates of "normality" and "ableism" vis-à-vis the gender attributed at birth. The surgical and hormonal transformations do not lead to a psychosocial "rectification" and may culminate in a dysfunctional womanhood. Revathi's unrequited love and failed marriage and Bornstein's inability to "qualify" as a lesbian will be read as instances of how the inadequacy of social structures is misconstrued as a "gender-impairment" in the individual and instituted as "hijra" or "butch."

Keywords: transgender, hijra, disability, autobiography

Normalcy, Resistance and Theories of Queer and Crip: An Introduction

Disability Studies, which began to gain theoretical relevance in the beginning of the last decade, has also contributed to a common epistemological interface with Queer Studies. In fact, the discrete conceptions of "disability" and "queer" have provided similar grounds for deconstructing structures of normalcy and an understanding which moves beyond existent categories of identification. The exploration of the varied trajectories of "difference" in the context of gender and dis/ability also pertains to the shared relevance of interconnectivity of the societal and the somatic. Research in the field has not only focused on the additive effects of dis/ablism and

non/heterosexual existences but it has also tried to use the theoretical model of one to interpret the other. Hence, Dan Goodley (2011) refers to the cultural model³⁹ of Disability Studies as one of “particular knowledge positions (Goodley 2001) to address and refute disablism (Thomas 2001)” (10) with the propensity to “connect analyses of disability studies with transformative ideas from feminism, queer and critical race studies” (14). Robert McRuer’s works are of considerable significance in indicating how analyses in each of the two field anticipate one another. The seminal argument of his works is that “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness: that in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness and vice-versa”(2) . On such grounds, he initiates the functionality of Crip Theory based on Queer Theory as a critique of the neoliberal capitalism in the social order that demonizes/denigrates non-heterosexual and disabled existences, having produced able-bodied heterosexuality as the natural order of things. The functionality of Crip theory may be explained as similar to the evolution of queer “oppositionally and relationally but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing, but as the resistance to the norm” (Halperin 66 qtd. in McRuer 31).

The centrality of resistance in both queer and crip invites us to investigate the phenomenology of the same. As Ellen Samuels explains, the resistance is only subsequent to the dominance of the constructed normalcy over the individual: “Once embedded in the cultural realm, fantasies of identification stubbornly persist, despite being disproved, undermined or contradicted and this persistence provokes resistance and disidentifications from subjects attempting to escape the fantasy’s totalizing imposition of identity” (3). This implies that prior to the resistance, there are the existences that cannot be accommodated within “fantasies” of identification which results in resistance. These existences may be termed “disidentification” and it is also necessary to explore these “attempts” at “disidentification” to find out whether they can be comprehended as more than resistance.

³⁹ The cultural model of Disability studies is explained in reference to Garland-Thomson (2) “who posits that disability is a cultural trope and historical community that raises questions about the materiality of the body and social formulations that are used to interpret bodily and cognitive differences. Affiliated scholars reject a firm distinction between impairment and disability because they view biology and culture as impinging upon each other” (Goodley 14).

Such a study derives from the distance/differences between the spaces of lived experiences and theoretical paradigms. The questionability of theory as an abstraction of lived experience is one of the major contestations in both the epistemological spaces, given the primacy of the ontological in areas such as Queer Studies, Transgender Studies or Disability Studies. Referring to disability, Sumi Collagen (2004) has already anticipated the necessity to render this counteraction to normalcy in a way that is sensitive to the reality of existence observing that “whereas flexible categories may be an antidote to the pressures and techniques of normalization, our imagining of these categories should not become too malleable and disengaged from the real bodies and lived experiences of these individuals with these bodies” (46). The debate intensifies in the context of Queer Theory⁴⁰, as scholars such as Vivian K. Namaste have misgivings about how queer theory accommodates the “everyday life for transgender people” indicating that while “critics in queer theory appeal to the social location of cultural texts, they offer little analysis of how social relations are inscribed within, and virtually no examinations of the institutions in which these texts are produced, nor those in which they emerge and circulate” (20). Hence, the existent discourses of Queer and Crip are contested or questioned about the modes of subverting normalcy.

This study is inspired by such contentions but seeks to chart out its own trajectory which is based on autobiographical narratives about transsexuality vis-à-vis the relational spaces of the queer theories and disability studies. The aim is to explore whether the “queer” and “disability” in the

⁴⁰ Certain Transgender Studies scholars have contended that the prevalent notion of gender performativity often compromises the ground realities of the drag and the transsexual. Jay Prosser argues that transsexuality in queer discourses, is thus construed without referring to the “desire” of the person to be differently gendered, the “constitutive significance of somatic feeling” (271). It is further added that the “displacement of sex from material interiority into fantasized surface” omits the transgendered expression of transforming the sexuality, emphasizing its “un-phantasmatic status” (271). Also, Vivian K. Namaste disagrees with the theorizations of performativity by Butler and Sedgwick among others, that directly and indirectly derive from transsexuality but are not beneficial to the transsexual visibility. Butler’s proposition that “the drag exposes the imaginary relations of compulsory heterosexuality.” As Namaste points out, although Butler locates these spaces in relation to heterosexual hegemony, she refuses to examine this territory’s own complicated relation to gender and gender performance.” (10). Eve Sedgwick’s construing a relation between “drag performance and homoerotic identity formation and display”, Namaste argues, disavows drag subject position. It also makes “sexuality and gender work against each other, as systematically aligned” entailing that “[d]rag is about performance, while the homoerotic is about identity” (11). She, hence, infers that “queer theory begins its analysis with little thought to individuals designated as objects of study” and “it belies a kind of academic inquiry that is contemptuous and dismissive of the social world” (16). While Prosser questions the conceptualization of performativity that dissociates sexuality from physicality, Namaste finds the means of conceptualization inadequate. This, therefore, supports the fact that there is a certain dissatisfaction with the discourses of Queer Theory in relation to Transgender Studies.

non-heteronormative⁴¹ experiences can be symptomatic of but not solely based on the common negation of “compulsory heterosexuality” and “compulsory able-bodiedness” (2) as imposed social constructs. This inquiry has already been initiated by McRuer. Here such exploration will contribute towards creating a relational space between Transgender Studies - which includes discourses on most gender-based marginalized identity-positions - and Disability Studies. The possibility of the alliance will also be based on sexuality as a mode of self-expression. The study will chart a trajectory that does not rely on the appeal of the unproblematic idea of resistance but takes into account several situational complexities, deconstructing not only the binaries of the normative/non-normative or ablism/disablism, but also possible newer binaries like that of normalcy/resistance.

Towards a Comparative Episteme for Transgender Autobiographies

Narratives about transgender experiences are increasing becoming available; examples include Rose Treiman's *Sacred Country* (1992), David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* (2000), Eugenides' *The Middlesex* (2002), and a number of autobiographical accounts like Jan Morris's *Conundrum* ([1974] 2011) Kate Bornstein's *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2012). In the Indian context, to which this paper will also refer to, the hitherto stigmatized sexual identities are increasing gaining visibility, for example, in such novels as *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik, and autobiographical writings like *The Man Who Would be Queen* (2011) by Hoshang Merchant or A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010). Revathi's autobiographical account describes a series of dangerous psychosocial and physiological quests to become a woman and to find the love of a man. The text is written in Tamil, and has been translated into English (by V. Geetha, a translator-historian-activist based in Tamil Nadu), as well as several other Indian languages. As a "hijra" who fought ridicule, persecution and violence both within and outside her home to find a life of dignity, Revathi refrains, for the most part, from making broad social commentary and always speaks for herself, rarely on behalf of the hijra community, recognizing the individual freedom in interpreting

⁴¹ The origin of the term 'heteronormative' can be traced back to Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality" (in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5:631-60 1980 and Gayle Rubin's "sex/gender system". Michael Warner initiated the usage of the term in the "Introduction" to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991). Later, Samuel A. Chambers employed the term in "Telepistemology of the Closet; Or, the Queer Politics of *Six Feet Under*". *Journal of American Culture* 26.1: 24-41, 2003 and "Revisiting the Closet: Reading Sexuality in *Six Feet Under*", in *Reading Six Feet Under* (McCabe and Akass, eds. IB Taurus, 2005). The term non-heteronormative is used as an adjective to qualify any existence or practice or desire that does not pertain to heterosexist privileges.

and being queer. On the other hand, she offers a sensitive approach to the lives of the fellow hijras, whose lives are articulated only in relation to hers, thus acknowledging their influences and never limiting their agency. At times, the hijra community seems almost as oppressive to its individual members as the mainstream society that refuses to accept them. Thus, she is not contributing to any politicized gender positions but has a more educative, informative purpose. In the "Preface" to the book she invokes her objective of "telling" her story as "one such individual who has been marginalized because" she "was born a male and wanted to live . . . [her] life as a woman." Revathi expresses the desire that "this book . . . will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work" and who do not merely "seek sympathy" but "do have the right to live in this society" (Preface v-vi). The Indian text will be juxtaposed with a more popularly known transgender autobiography - Kate Bornstein's *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*. The latter book is an exploration of Bornstein's gender journey, including uncontrived narrations of her lifelong eating disorders, her bodily experiments, and her erotic adventures, all of which are significant to her conception of the self and gender. Bornstein gives us the opportunity to see behind the scenes and into the early gender outlaw days as she grapples with coming out as a lesbian-transsexual, learning how to work as an embodiment of gender, and to find self-understanding in the body she transforms. Often Bornstein also makes forays beyond her personal experiences in reconfiguring gender; she recounts her mother's first steps toward individual freedom after her father's death, describes the trial of Brandon Teena's murderer,⁴² her early activist days when she visited the house where Tina died, as well as the audience's reaction to her first queer stage performance. The work mostly succeeds in striking a balance between the dark and controversial and the witty and hopeful.

An essential point to be noted is that the juxtaposition of Revathi's and Bornstein's texts does not entail the subsuming of Revathi's articulation of the indigenous hijra identity by that of Bornstein's transgender identity. Instead, possible connections are drawn between their decisions to reject the gender identity attributed at birth. A comparison is made between the significance that is attributed to their unconventional experiences pertaining to sexuality in both the narratives. Finally, the analogy is examined between the endeavors by both authors to articulate the self in the context of the changeability of sex and gender. It is true that in the Indian context the academic

⁴² Brandon Teena was an American trans-man who was brutally raped and murdered. Since then, his life has become the subject of several discourses on gender fluidity, including the movie *Boys Don't Cry* (Pierce 1999) and the documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (Villarejo 19).

trans discourse is yet to be substantiated. While occasionally using the umbrella term of "transgender" to refer to the experiences of Revathi, the paper maintains that it is very important to understand the experiential specificities of being a hijra and being a transgender. On the other hand, it is also necessary to understand the similarities (which is very different from sameness) in Revathi and Bornstein's experiences, similarities that can also be understood in the context of discourses of Disability Studies. The aim is to offer a comparative illumination of both texts without any intention of homogenizing the hijra-narrative with the trans-narrative.

Evidently, the narratives are of very different socio-cultural affiliations. At the very beginning of the narrative, Revathi actualizes her rural, regional-India space ("a small village in Namakkal taluk, Salem district" [1]) with references to the village school, the *kollam* in front of the house, the temple and the *pujas*, and the coconut trees. Kate Bornstein identifies herself as typically American with urban sophistication. Her authorial position involves frequent references to Harry Potter, Church of Scientology, her tattooed body, and Hollywood. In the process of contextualizing the self in the society at large, Bornstein makes a very conscious attempt to depict the stringent gendered practices in the upper middle class home of an American surgeon ("Gender in our family was simple: real he-men were supposed to hate women, or at least know they're a whole lot better than women" [1]). It is, therefore, of interest to notice that Revathi makes no such specific statement about the role of gender in the home, though she does explore the travails of poverty. Yet she also reveals the gender imbalance through the description of her every-day circumstances and how in the act of struggle with poverty, the man and the woman have separate roles to play, the man outside the house, and the woman within it. However, what is most remarkable is the difference in the understanding of the quotidian gender practices by the two transgender authors. For Bornstein, the comfortable space of prosperous urban life becomes that of unwilling conformity to gender. Revathi, on the other hand, finds scope in her more precarious living conditions for reciprocal tactics to release her feminine angst. Her mother, too busy and impoverished to pay attention to gender propriety, lets her son do chores that he (yet to become she) should not be doing, but that he likes to do. Whereas Bornstein refers to the first encounter with a prostitute paid for by his father, struggles with anorexia, as well as discovering other gender-bending people, theatrical performance, alcohol, and weed, Revathi talks of Hindu customs and rituals that permitted cross-dressing, hijra-communities of beggars and sex workers, the religious authorities' approval for such

existences, and NGOs that only seemed to offer respite from the parochial social reality and other hegemonic intrusions in the personal realm, in the Indian regional space.

Interestingly, however, both the narratives, in spite of the vastly different spaces of origin emulate the lived experiences, mirror the interaction with the social system and also interact with the social consciousness through the readers articulating quotidian experiences and also providing a critique of the societal notions of gender roles. This leads to the formation of a relational space between the gendered realities of an Indian hijra and an American transsexual which provides scope for exploring certain parallels that may be read more effectively through the observations of Disability Studies rather than Queer Theory.

Moreover, these being autobiographical narratives, the centrality of self-representation implies that the agency of commenting on the society is now given to those in the "position of powerlessness" who "have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself" (Swindells 7). Transgender Studies has been drawing on memoirs and personal narratives of transgenders who hitherto "functioned only as a metaphor for gender instability in some places and gender stability in others," now, through personal narration, have begun to "speak for themselves about their experiences of embodiment and to voice their own interpretations of gender and sexuality in relation to the surgically and hormonally altered body." They have produced "valuable new knowledge about the persistence of gender, the materiality of the body, and the production of sex" (Halberstam 313). Autobiographical narratives have gained relevance in Disability Studies. *Encyclopedia of Disability* (2006) defines them as texts that try to rise above "cultural constraints" that "continue to limit the counter-hegemonic potential" and hence the authors "undermine the limited medical paradigms . . . in their consciousness of their own condition as culturally constructed as shared by others" (2026). There is also a commonality in which scholarship in both the fields has become attuned to the usability and the flexibility of the autobiographical genre as a mode of self-representation.

The aforementioned cultural differences, the generic connection, and the shared psychosomatic experiences of transsexuality "in the two texts under discussion will be here contextualized in relation to local symbols, beliefs, practices and history" (Bale and Philo 42) that follow "the logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience, namely, birth, marriage,

reproduction and death" (Halberstam 2), and thus will be based on the comparative episteme⁴³ will be thus ordained. The advent of gender studies within Comparative Literature, therefore, pertains to such a turn in the history of the discipline. The decennial "Report of Standards" by ACLA, that was led by Charles Bernheimer in 1993 tried to provide an overview of this transformation within the discipline:

The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures . . . between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying. . . . (41–42)

Interdisciplinary studies bridging Queer Studies and Comparative Literary Studies have thus far suggested that "the parallels between different kinds of comparison as well as the in-betweens they set up might be related to the concept of intersectionality, which has become key in the field of queer studies, as many have critiqued the whiteness and masculinist biases of many definitions of queer" and thus enabled the comprehension of "how categories such as sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religious affiliation and acculturation overlap and inflect one another in any given individual and within the social field" (Hayes, Higgonnett, and Spurlin 6). This study, however, caters to the context of Queer conceived as more "a point of contention than a form of working assumption—standing in, as it often does, for non-normative erotic acts and identities in general and same sex ones in particular, as well as for non-normative performances of gender" (Trubb 217). This study will aim at understanding gender fluidity in these two autobiographies vis-à-vis critical paradigms of disability.

⁴³ The disciplinary space of Comparative Literature provides grounds to investigate the shared experiences, the "patterns of connections in literature" (Bassnett 1) to comprehend how the idea of Disability, as explanatory about sexualities, can be read in these narratives. This comparative episteme is put to use by the new directions in the discipline by which as Susan Bassnett explains "study of themes and movements not only continues unabated, but possibly is even on the increase. The difference is, of course, that the impulse is now coming from within areas of work defined under other headings . . . such as postcolonial studies or gender studies" (116). Comparative literary studies, even deriving from the traditional notion of "mutual illumination of several texts . . . considered side by side" (Praver 101) also refer to an academic practice by which similarities can be deciphered without submerging the differences in any space or situation.

Reading Queer-Crip through the Comparative Episteme of Transsexuality

The intended comparative episteme will interrogate certain elisions and gaps in the theoretical paradigm of Queer. The inexplicability of certain moments in the transgender narratives from the Queer position will be addressed in the study. Firstly, the comparative paradigm will enable the tracing of how both narratives converge in such moments; then, observations and inferences drawn by scholars of Disability Studies will help address and analyze these convergences. The sustained conversation between disability and the narratives of transsexuality will also be used to further verify the comparability of the narratives and contribute towards the strengthening of the comparative episteme of transsexuality.

Invocations of "disability" occur in both narratives under discussion. They begin with the recognition of the intensifying need to be differently gendered. The birth-attributed gender is rejected and a "transgressing" of gender boundaries is already initiated in childhood. Both Revathi and Bornstein are affected by an innate desire for a "feminine" form of existence as well as the social injunction of following the dictates of "normality" and "ableism" vis-à-vis the gender attributed at birth. Both narrators recount moments of clarity, when they realize their inability to live as a boy, and their disposition towards being a girl. Hence, Revathi writes that she "did know" that she "behaved like a girl" which "felt natural" as she "did not know how to be like a boy." To explain this further, she uses a metabolic analogy that pertains to the bodily "dis-ease" with the birth-attributed gender: "It was like eating for me – just as I would not stop eating because someone asked me not to eat, I felt I could not stop being a girl because others told me I ought not to be so" (7). Bornstein articulates herself with reference to more material issues, such as a television show she disliked, in which "a gang of preadolescent boys" started "the He-Man-Woman-hater's club". Albert Bornstein, as a child "wanted to grow up to be Audrey Hepburn: skinny, graceful, charming, delighted, smart, talented, a star, and a lady and "didn't want the Little Rascals to hate" her. The dis-ableism is further pronounced as she remembers trying to be a boy: "What it was that boys did, I couldn't do naturally. I learned how to act" (13). Thus the writer's language denotes the obstructions of normal gender-conduct on the authors' body and indicates how the disability of the body to perform the birth-attributed gender is constructed. The body can be read as dysfunctional in terms of heteronormativity as it does not have the abilities it "should" to perform according to the birth-attributed gender.

Judith Butler defines gender as “neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as 'internal' and 'hidden' nor . . . reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play between psyche and appearance (where the latter domain includes what appears in words)” and therefore it is also “a “play” regulated by heterosexist constraints though not, for that reason, fully reducible to them” (178). Hence the limiting cultural construction of gender is the chief concern in these discourses. The role of the “psyche” pertaining to an element of the “choice” or the “will” of self in gender is explained away through the comprehension of performativity in terms of “being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure” (185). Therefore, queer theoretical understanding has promoted gender-ambiguity to “put a denaturalizing pressure on sex, gender, sexuality, bodies and identities” which “might inadvertently reinforce that heterosexual hegemony they are programmatically opposed to” and which “has generated an imperative—even a willingness—to adopt analytical models that question the authenticity of identity, and particularly those that critique the putatively causal relation between a secure identity and an effective politics” (Jagose 90-93) It should, therefore, be noted that though Revathi and Bornstein’s dis-ease with the imposed male-performativity is explained by the above discourses, what remains unexplained is why this situation of imposition is actualized or the reasons why the male identity is felt to be imposed.

It becomes evident in these narratives that the source of this dis-ease is the other disability, that of yearning to and not being able to be a woman, not explained in the theoretical discourses. To refer again to the narratives, the complexities of disabled femininity in a male-body are the central concern. This is better explained with reference to Disability Studies where “disability is not a pathological condition, only analyzable via individual psychology, but a social location complexly embodied” (Siebers 283). Hence discourses on disability are dependent on an individual’s problematic interaction with the society in terms of physicality. This helps in comprehending the gender-fluidity of an individual not only in terms of negating social constructions but also in terms of the possibilities of attaining the desired existence.

Take for example, Revathi's comprehension of the desired womanhood when she was a boy. Shocked at the secret sexual liaisons of companions she found outside the heterosexist domains, Revathi, who was still then the boy Doraiswamy, "did not want to have sex that way and above all . . . desired to become a woman, marry an educated man and only then have sex." Her companion "laughed derisively" and "told [her] that it was not all that easy to become a woman" and after the operation and the other drudgeries of a hijra life, she could only "hope to become one" (19). Meanwhile, Bornstein remembers being a male teenager having sex with men, but it "got too painful - doing sex just for sex" and lacking "the feel of being girl." So, sometimes she would have a relationship with "a wonderful girl, and knuckled down to being a real guy" till it was not possible to take "being a man any longer," so she took to "weed and alcohol" (35). Evidently, Revathi and Bornstein articulate a vortex of social relations, affective needs, and physical issues that are better explained by the range of corporeal experiences that scholarship in Disability Studies pertains to. Kristin Lindgren in "Bodies in Trouble" refers to the "distinction between 'being' a body which denotes the body as perceptive and 'having' one," where the body is an object of perception, a distinction which fuels the "the debates about the nature of embodiment" (149). Hence, "a healthy body that is absent from the consciousness" is distinctive from a diseased one that is negatively present in the consciousness." The observation can be appropriated to suit the somatic urge for a different sexuality than the one attributed to the body. The need to be different in this context pertains to a negative presence in the consciousness, though not necessarily a disease, as suggested by both Revathi as Doraiswamy, who perceives the inaccessibility of surgery as an obstacle to womanhood and Bornstein who takes to substance-abuse.

There is evidently a sense of the body being dysfunctional that is not a social construction but an individual internalized feeling. This influences the way one construes the "sensory insistence of pain [which] draws the corporeal out of self-concealment, rendering it thematic. No event more radically and inescapably reminds us of our bodily presence" (Leder 76 qtd. in Lindgren 148). Disability Studies thus refers to a model of embodiment that is changeable, enabling us to comprehend the convergences in both narratives about the process of "transgendering" (Ekins and King 34) as initiated by the sense of disability/queerness of being in the "wrong body."

Reassigning Gender: Reading (Dis)Ability, (Dis)Identification and Desire

The question of bodily limitations, differentiated from social injunctions but detrimental to the self-comprehension of gender, can be further explored in terms of gender-reassignment surgery,⁴⁴ which is an issue of much contention in queer discourses. This act may be incompatible with resistance to heterosexist notions. Gender-reassignment surgery, felt to be necessary by most transgender people, has made most queer theorists arrive at the conclusion that the procedure does not “challenge [the] reliance upon a fixed two-sex model to secure notions of identity” (Hall 95). This often leads to an unproblematic articulation of “transgendering” as “new technologies that make biological sex a potentially changeable aspect of human life” which ostensibly makes it “far different from what was the case in de Beauvoir’s day, one can indeed now ‘become’ a woman whatever one’s biological sex at birth” (Hall 95). This kind of “transgendering” is prone to the threat constituted in becoming a woman, “a culturally overloaded term that carries with it so much heterosexual baggage” (95) thus contributing to the crisis of sexed categories. While it is essential to challenge the gender categories in the social consciousness which Queer Studies is trying to achieve, there is a possibility of miscomprehension of the exact role of the gender-reassignment surgery and hormonal procedures when it comes to transsexuality. There is, hence, a hesitancy and the need to change the focus to other seemingly more important details in relation to sex-change. Nikki Sullivan writes: “*Whilst* transgender people and organizations continued (and still, by necessity, do) to lobby for greater access to surgery, policies which would enable changes to be made to official documents such as birth certificates, the right to marry, the right to adopt children, and so on, *a more outspoken . . .* kind of approach became increasingly popular amongst those who . . . felt it imperative to expand the bounds of culturally intelligible gender, and to speak in their own voices *rather than ‘passing’* into silence and invisibility” (112, italics mine). It will not be presumptuous to infer that queer theorists associate sex-change surgery with possibilities of repressing the resistance to gender categories. Likewise, trans theorists contribute to this debate about gender fluidity and gender continuity: while Margaret O’Harrington, Holly Devor, Jay Prosser, and Bernice Hausman have referred to the “value of gendered realness” (Hausman 473), Pat Califia, Judith Halberstam, and Kate Bornstein have asked: “Why do transsexuals have to become

⁴⁴ Gender-reassignment surgery is also known as genital reconstruction surgery, or more popularly, sex-change surgery. The procedures began to develop between the 1920s and the 1950s, and were initially used to victimize and control people who did not conform to the gender binary (Mackenzie 40). This is why it becomes essential to explore the element of choice in resorting to the surgery as it emerges in both narratives under discussion.

'real women' or 'real men' instead of just being transsexual. . . . And why can't people go back and forth if they want to?" (Califia 181-2). The questions persist whether surgical sex-change undermines the notion of fluid identities that is so central to Queer Theory and to what effect.

It will, thus, be of importance to note the parallels in the two autobiographical narratives pertaining to sex-change. In two significantly titled chapters, "Over the Borderline" and "Stages of Life," Bornstein writes about the phases of sex change, the psychotherapy sessions, the one-year process of transgenering to a woman and the hormonal and surgical procedures. All these were undertaken because she had come to a certain conclusion about her gendered reality. As she had "ruled out cross-dressing as an option," the "only other options were drag queen, she-male working girl, and real woman—well, as close to that as I could get." As she felt she "wasn't pretty, graceful, or feminine enough to make it as a drag queen or working girl" and "too old for any sex work except phone sex," the "only road left took [her] . . . to the door of the Mount San Rafael Hospital in Trinidad, Colorado, where ol' Doc Biber turned boys into girls and girls into boys with wacky meatball surgery" (187). This involved processes of "correcting" her gender. At this point she makes a very significant statement: when she was a girl, she was also a thirty-eight-year old man who "had to make up for lost time . . . and had to learn girl from the ground up, just like" he had "had to learn boy" (183). However, because she herself deemed the medical intervention and learning process necessary, it felt less of an imposition than trying to be a boy and a man in the earlier stages of her life.

Echoes of similar psychosomatic infractions can be traced in Revathi's narrative. She writes that while "wearing men's clothes" she "wanted to wear what women did." However, "after wearing women's clothes and trying to live like a woman," she "still felt [like] a man." The elders in the hijra-house where she had sought shelter decided to sponsor her sex-change procedure (her train-tickets and seven-thousand rupees). She "felt that finally the female . . . would be freed from her male body" and "was ecstatic" (67) despite the gross medical negligence in her situation, because in India sex-change was still taboo and "this sort of operation was done stealthily" (75), as Revathi was soon to find out. What becomes evident here is the need for "hijra-houses," which function as surrogate families and are not informed by the Euro-American Human-Rights framework or the postmodern and post-structural notions of identity politics, but are born of and grounded in the problems of everyday life. As Revathi explains, such surrogate families are necessary because

"[only] a pottai knows another pottai's feelings, pain loss and anguish" (82). There is hardly any post-operative medical care except from the guru-hijra (the elder hijra who takes a few younger ones under her wing) and other elder hijras.

These particular affinities in the two autobiographies point to gender-reassignment as a solution to problems of self-comprehension rather than as conforming to a pre-determined identity. The relevance of the surgery is a matter of choice and consent of the individual. Hence, it is possible to address its problematic meaning with the idea of "medical intervention" in Disability Studies. It should be noted that from the perspective of Queer Studies the idea of "cure" is problematic, for it implies that homosexuality is a pathological condition. This study proposes that medical intervention should be a matter of individual choice. In both Revathi's and Bornstein's case, the preliminary decision to undergo surgery cannot be explained as undertaken solely under social pressure; it is rather the result of an internal (or perhaps internalized) idea of gendered reality. Consequently, there is a degree of relevance of the medical intervention when it comes to these bodily situations in Transgender Studies as in Disability Studies. This, especially, pertains to the gap between the nature of requirement and availability of medical benefits which is "problematic, both because no single condition of 'disability' is universally recognized, and because physical and mental incapacity are conditions that can be feigned for secondary gain. Hence, the concept of disability has always been based on a perceived need to detect deception" (23), which is also the case with the need to be differently gendered. To gain clinical approval for a sex-change, the individual must submit to psychological counseling, as Bornstein writes, and to questioning about his or her sexual desires and practices. This exposes the individual to unwanted interference and harassment. In Revathi's narrative, the almost total lack of medical facilities for sex-change procedures can also be explained by construing the "problem of a validating device" (Stone 23) that leads to the "official recognition of transsexuality." In this context, a question may arise about the concept of "official recognition of disability," determined by the medical model of disability which has been considered as "one rooted in an undue emphasis on clinical diagnosis, the very nature of which is destined to lead to a partial and inhibiting view of the disabled individual" (Shakespeare 20), a view that is, then, imposed through legal measures to acquire certain authoritatively granted benefits. Therefore, there is an affinity between the two concepts, both repressive and enabled by a clinical-legal comprehension of a bodily situation, without considering the need for individual choices and desires. Here, again, it becomes necessary to read medical

intervention as a matter of choice and in the process enabled by the individual self. Moreover, medical intervention in gender identity also pertains to the cycle of anticipation and assurances about a satisfactory gendered reality. In effect, such procedures also operate on the balance of “the desire to believe that medical treatment is effective” and “the admission of medical failure to cure or restore” (Stone 151). In the autobiographical retrospection, Bornstein and Revathi are not only certain that clinical transformation of sex and gender was necessary but also that the medical intervention is not the end but the means (albeit acquired with difficulty) to a satisfactory gendered reality.

In view of the above discussion, the decision to maintain connectivity between sexuality and gender identity may not necessarily support a heterosexist framework of existence. Nor should it be mandatory to maintain a fluid identity to disrupt the heterosexist framework. Having become a woman, Revathi has breached certain hetero-patriarchal codes, especially of being a son in an Indian family. Having aligned the psychosomatic urges with her bodily appearance, Revathi visits her family who insist that “he” (as opposed to “she”) take off the female disguise. She replies: “Disguise? Costume? . . . Everything that happened before, the clothes I wore, the life I led, the way I had to be – that was when I was in disguise, when I wore a costume” (114). Kate Bornstein speaks of the alignment in similar terms, in the name of all those who undergo the treatment: “Each of us left behind us the ghost of the man or woman we’d been pretending to be for so long that it hurt enough to make us want to go through with this surgery or kill ourselves” (188). Evidently, both Revathi and Bornstein are speaking of medical intervention as a means of coming to terms with the self rather than the society. This can be further explained by the concept of “passing” explored in Disability Studies with the “passer’s marginal identity . . . as an instance of defiance” and passers as “deviant people trying to achieve, or even eke their way back to, normalcy” (Titchkosky 69). This does not entail merely “copying” but also “knowing” and hence “a way to work with cultural knowledge” (70-71) about normalcy. The act of transgending leading to surgical gender-reassignment, therefore, need not be read in terms of living up to social expectations but rather as negotiating the chosen gendered reality with the social milieu.

Further evidence for the above claims can be found in the morphological implications of the narratives which are not built upon the achievement of “real” womanhood, but rather on the experiences of transsexuality. By living as a woman and even reconfiguring the body in that

manner, neither of the authors is trying to articulate her desire to "pass" as a woman. The linear narrative form, the lack of fictional strategies, particularly in Revathi's text, and the very transparent usage of the terms "hijra" and "queer" in the title, all refer to the narrative motivations to describe two existences that are non-normative. The structural integrity of both narratives is derived from the way they negotiate, modify, violate and appropriate the "normalcy" in womanhood to cover a trajectory of self-fulfillment. To refer again to the previous argument of convergences in diversity, the contrivances of both narratives are similar with respect to a self-articulated womanhood.

Deconstructing the "newer" binary of "normativity" and "resistance"

Revathi's and Bornstein's narratives are also comparable in terms of conflicted interactions of self and society vis-a-vis their self-articulated womanhood. Revathi and Bornstein do not treat surgery as a means of normalization. They note in their respective narratives that surgical and hormonal transformations do not lead to a psychosocial "rectification" culminating in a non-heteronormative womanhood. Instances can be drawn from both narratives of how the inadequacy of social structures is conveyed as a "gender-impairment" in the individual and instituted as "hijra" or "butch," rather than in terms of a self-articulated "womanhood." Every-day trivial matters engender complications. Noticeably, both the narratives refer to damaging public spaces. Revathi writes about how she was "dismissed as a pottai" and "shooed away from" both women's and men's toilet (54), harassed in public transport and secluded from the mainstream professional sphere because she would be "the ruin of all the boys" there (163). Bornstein, in turn, refers to her "humiliating" predicament in her workplace, where "building management said a flat no to the ladies room, and" she "refused to use the men's room," while the "private bathroom" assigned to her had "no door" or "toilet paper" (177). Such conflicted social interactions also take place in more emotionally charged spaces. Revathi comments on how her family members reacted with hostility to her sex change, wondering aloud how she had managed to stay "alive" after such transgression, and stating that "[j]ust because you've worn a sari we cannot call you a woman" (113). Bornstein's situation parallels that of Revathi when her mother, and her elder brother refused to acknowledge her for some time and her daughter from her first heterosexual relationship continued to do so till the end of this narrative. In such circumstances. Identity is not a normalized one, a form of ableism. One of the many stands that queer theorists take is a complete disavowal of the social milieu and of the identities that are built in relationships embedded in the social milieu as heterosexual. Queer identity is thus taken up only in terms of challenging rather than reconstructing a space for

existence. As Lee Edelman writes, the “embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself. For by figuring a refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount value of futurity, while refusing as well any backdoor hope for dialectical access to meaning, the queer dispossesses the social order of the ground on which it rests: a faith in the consistent reality of the social-and by extension, of the social subject” (6).

However, it is evident from the narratives that this dissociation does not occur in the everyday reality. Mainstream ideologies specifically are not coherent entities but intermingled with our daily practices, our entire modes of sense-making. Spaces for the marginalized, ostensibly not associated with the heterosexist-able-bodied social order, often entail forms of disablement. Analogous situations in the narratives under discussion exemplify this idea. Revathi writes about her gradual dislocation from the hijra community when the “aravani” communities fail to understand and hence dissociate themselves from Revathi’s choice to have a job in the NGO Sangamma for sexual minorities. The job makes her unpopular among her fellow-hijras who still prefer the traditions of begging and prostitution. She subsequently marries one of her superiors at that organization, who himself asserted the marginalized self-identity of a bisexual and then said that the marriage was “one of the biggest mistakes” of his life (289). Bornstein felt (and was) increasingly isolated from most sexual-minority groups because she “was a lesbian and so couldn’t be a real transsexual” (189) and a “transsexual in a group of real women” (191).

What is derived from such convergences can be read through Disability Studies as the tendency of the “[a]ble-bodied (or temporarily able-bodied) people” to “safely wall off the severely disabled so that they cannot be seen as part of a continuum of physical differences” (Davis 7). What happens is segregation based on the degree of normalcy of the body, which further contributes to the argument that Revathi’s self-identification as a woman and Bornstein’s desire to be a woman are, in fact, unrecognized forms of subversion. The obliteration of the desire for specific gendered abilities (which are not birth attributed entities) from queer discourses can be read a case of “methodological distancing.” As Mitchell and Snyder explain, “denigrated identities are “rescued” by understanding gendered, racial, and sexual differences as textually produced, distancing them from the ‘real’ of physical or cognitive aberrancy projected onto their figures” (2). To extend the

process further, “individuals with physical disabilities have historically disassociated themselves from those who have intellectual disabilities” (3). Discussing disability, Robert McRuer also refers to Mitchell and Snyder to explain how “members of marginalized communities in effect identify an even more marginalized group in order to resist the stigma imposed by a dominant culture” and hence, “people with physical and mental disabilities who are *perceived* as a bit queer can demonstrate that such a difference is textually produced by distancing themselves from the ‘real’ queerness or perversion (embodied by those who are not straight)” (225). In the above cases, as Revathi and Bornstein become isolated, there are varied degrees of normalcy intervening in the existence of the non-normative. Queer Theory has posited that normalcy cannot be resisted as a coherent entity. So the actions and agencies that pertain to the appropriation of the normal must also be explored. When individualized resistances only seem to be giving in to certain social expectations, they need not declassify them as resistance.

At the climactic points in their autobiographies, both Revathi and Bornstein seek recourse to the enunciation of gendered abilities of the self vis-à-vis the consistent need and occurrence of self-comprehension. Revathi has a flexible association with the hijra-culture, as she never becomes fully dependent on the younger hijras she helped (which is an age-old tradition, still practiced in hijra-houses). Her identity as a working woman, living alone while fulfilling the role of the bread-earner and nurse to her aged parents, in spite of the Indian setup of heteronormative patriarchy, is conveyed in the words: “I had lived on my own, as a single woman” and so “went back to working at Sangamma” (303). In an interview for a national daily she revealed: “In your teens, the dream of becoming a complete woman is so fantasy-like I can’t begin to explain. But soon the reality hits you; while that transitioning from man to a woman is a big struggle, to live as a woman is equally a big struggle. But really this pain is my strength and will keep my activism going. We have mountains to move.” Such a gendered construing of the self can also be traced in Bornstein’s individualized understanding of gender categories and appearances and in her final declaration of fulfillment as “a boy looking hot in girl clothes. Boy, not man—two different genders” (244). She then goes on to say: “Most importantly, I’d discovered the nature of my desire: I wanted to be the kind of girl I was attracted to” (244), and “Cute is a valid way to express yourself, just like any other way you want to express the kind of man or woman or boy or girl or whatever it is you feel like being” (251). These words again validate the centrality of the act of knowing the self, without the knowledge-producing tools. Such self-knowledge may or may not bear any resemblance to pre-

existing conceptions. This indicates that the objective is not conforming (or not) to gender categories but finding out a gendered self with which to interact with the psychosocial realm. A parallel can be found in how studies in disability configure the idea of normal and the resistance to normalcy. Sumi Laggen writes that "rupture rarely marks unconditional openings for progressive social change" and "the promise and benefits of normalization are, at best, partial, and at worst, downright deceptive and contradictory, leaving room to articulate ongoing cultural critiques and oppositional strategies." Therefore, "normal does not always successfully parade as authentic" and "its incomplete replication sometimes creates a space for subversion and transgression" (53). Revathi and Bornstein as transsexual women choosing their own gendered reality may not be resisting heterosexist normalcy by subscribing to gender fluidity but flouting gender norms by appropriating normalcy.

Conclusion: Queer-Trans and Crip-Trans: Further Possibilities

Evidently, these references to Disability Studies to understand transsexuality, work towards a possible Cripistemology of the Queer that perceives resistance to compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness as arising out of the primary need of an every-day process of self-articulation contributing to a continuous process of self-comprehension, and hence secondary to a more constitutive form of existence. The diversified nature of both the fields of studies cannot obliterate the above examples from the transgender narratives that pertain to Disability Studies. The present study hopes to demonstrate that in narrating the everyday in the transgender situation, it is not possible to operate on the binary of conformity and non-conformity, and often there is a problematic confluence of both. The nature of the confluence cannot be uniform, just as modes of resistance to normalization cannot be uniform. So the idea of "Cripistemology" refers to the knowledge derived from Disability Studies to provide an alternative understanding of the queer in transsexuality. The comparability of the narratives, (and not the two fields of study) makes it sufficiently clear that though subscribing to two different socio-political motivations, the models of studying disability can be used to explore some of the pre-existent contentions in the Trans-Queer alliance. The study does not so much try to forge a Queer-Crip alliance, as it tries to use insights from Disability Studies to provide an alternative to Queer Studies' interpretations of the experiences of transsexuality in relation to issues of normalcy and resistance.

One of the emphases of this study has been the cultural specificity of the narratives, with Revathi speaking from the Indian understanding of gender (where Queer theories are mostly absorb from American thinking), and Bornstein from a more visible space of popular and academic understanding of Queer. Though the patterns of Disability can be traced in the both narratives, yet the circumstances are evidently very different. Both Revathi and Bornstein contribute to the ideation of alternative existences that seem to derive from the normal, but they also expose the shortcomings of normalization in a culture-specific manner. The modes of gender imposition and the choices of gendered reality for the self in Revathi's narrative, contextualized in spaces of the familial, the occupational, and the medicinal, are specific to regional India - particularly Southern India. Bornstein's narrative focuses on more material privileges, freedom from familial conservatism, as well as the lack of indigenous practices of community-formation. This re-emphasizes the idea of normalcy as constructed with culture-specific practices. The resistance to normalcy constitutes an alternative existence as has already been explained, which is also culture-specific. Hence, the intersectional understanding of non-normative gender functionality validates the lack of uniformity in understanding the Queer-Crip alliance.

Interestingly, therefore, when structures of disabling can be located in spite of the disparity in the cultural formations, it becomes possible to negate the uniformity of what McRuer terms as the "specter of globalization" and increasing concern with the "global bodies or desires" which have caused much anxiety to scholars of both Disability and Queer Studies. A comparative episteme of transgender narratives, read with inferences drawn from Disability Studies, can be posited as an alternative to understanding the already existing Queer-Crip alliance. This alliance, which embraces unity without subsuming differences, reflects McRuer's understanding of "postidentity politics that allows [us] to work together, . . . that acknowledges the complex and contradictory histories of our movements, drawing on and learning from those histories rather than transcending them" (202). As such, the Queer-Crip alliance should contribute towards resolving the crisis of globalization in the discourses of the non-normative.

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