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The Site of Transition From Female To Male

Artists' Pages by Clarissa Sligh, *Afterimage*, May 2001

IN THIS WORK I INTERROGATE MY LOCATION AS PHOTOGRAPHER while making pictures of Jake as he transitioned from female to male. At the time Jake asked me to photograph his sex change in 1996, his name was Deb. Having never heard of gender dysphoria, the state of mind which characterizes the desire for gender reassignment, I was naive about the complexity or intensity of the process. What part did my own subjectivity, as a fiftyish black heterosexual woman from the Southeast, play in constructing images of a thirtyish white Midwestern lesbian who was working to become a heterosexual man?

The concept of changing one's identity was not new to me. While growing up I'd heard stories about slaves escaping to become "free" and light skinned blacks "passing" for white. In 1848, a woman named Ellen Craft did both. In her husband's 1860 narrative about their journey, he wrote, "It occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape. For the Crafts, crossing the Mason Dixon line was contingent on Ellen successfully crossing the boundaries of black to white, slave to owner, woman to man and wife to master.

The history of "passing," its assumption of fraudulently trespassing, and its question of authenticity seemed to parallel Jake's quest. But from the stories he told me about middle class life in Indiana and his parents' opposition to ending defacto (by practice) racial segregation in the public schools he attended, I got the impression that he did not relate his situation to that of blacks.

Even before the Civil Rights Movement was being shaped in the 1950s, my mother had made "the fight for racial equality" part of our lives. I never forgot my feelings of rage when the confessed kidnappers of Emmett Till were acquitted. He was the fourteen-year-old black boy who was beaten, shot in the head and thrown in the Tallahatchie River because he spoke to a white woman in Money, Mississippi. This event is just one of many which marks my work.

Although Jake's act had its own value and meaning, it was not my issue and I was wary of the ethical and political violence inherent in "speaking for others." On top of that, Jake wanted to be the kind of man who embraced patriarchal and misogynistic values.

Why would I, a black feminist, choose to work with a person who had Jake's values? The answer lies in having always lived and worked with people who are racist and/or sexist. Within this was formed my blueprint for self-destruction and survival. Grudgingly I have had to admit that each of us is more complicated than our "labels" would imply. Admittedly, I had a hard time understanding why Jake could not remain the masculine female which he had been, but I halfway understood the impulse to want to fit into the mainstream culture.

From the beginning I felt conflicted in my role as a documentary photographer. For one thing it was not my field of work. In order to understand and perhaps resolve being at odds in my role as the interpreter of Jake's process, I taped our dialogues, researched trans-sexuality and maintained a personal journal. My photographic objective was to show the body's physical alterations. I saw my 4 x 5 view camera as a tool to create visual evidence of the body's transformation.

In our second photo shoot, I asked Jake to disrobe. Since he had seemed so relaxed, his discomfort in undressing in front of the camera threw me off a bit. Embarrassed to see his agonizing self-consciousness, I felt thrust into the role of voyeur. I averted my gaze, gave him some privacy by not looking straight at him. Thinking reflection, reflecting, I turned my camera towards the dresser mirror.

That session was probably the most difficult one for Jake. Mine would come later. Afterwards I realized that in order to photograph Jake, I would have to be able to look, to see, to open my mind. I would have to struggle to be the voyeur, to hold my gaze and to confront and overcome the taboos and conventions that "nice colored girls" don't do, ask about, look at, or think about certain things across racial lines.

On the day that Jake had his double mastectomy, I wrote in my journal: "I will shoot her tonight. Now that the time has come I am terrified, ambivalent, no, horrified, about her cutting out her female body parts. Somehow it feels like it's my body, like it's being done to me. Will I be able to follow through?"

The next day I wrote, "As she began removing her shirt, I thought, 'I hope I don't get sick.'"

After working together three and a half months. I felt unsure about the nature of the relationship. I also became conscious of mediating between the perceived fiction and the reality of the transformative process. I wanted to deromanticize it and to show both Jake's struggles and triumphs. My journal revealed my shift to empathize with and support him.

When Jake came out of surgery on his genitalia, he looked like he was in so much pain that I could not make myself take a photograph. I waited for him to feel better. After two and a half months he finally admitted that he had been in tremendous pain since the silicon balls were inserted. I began to notice his despair. I did not want him to quit, so I began taking photographs again. I shifted my photographic goal and my camera to 35 mm in order to put more of a human face on what was becoming Jake's new body.

After working with Jake most of 1997, I could tell that he had begun to depend on me to be in his life. It dawned on me that I, with the camera, had provided a space that was helping him through the process. From 1998 on, I visited Jake in Texas once a year. When I saw him in the spring of 1999 he had completely crossed over to being a man. Although I have this nagging question of "does the means justify the end," I can't help but respect Jake's decision to give up everything, including the possible ability to have a sexual orgasm, in order to be the kind of sexual human being that he wanted to become. It was what gave me the impetus to stick with the project over that three-year period.

During the time that I photographed Jake after his surgeries, I saw my biggest challenge as looking at what I thought of as bodily mutilation. While observing and supporting him in his physical changes so that he could pass as a white man, I suppressed my own thoughts about being unable to change my brown skin to escape, even for one second, the layer of oppression one experiences as a person who is black.

However, working with and supporting someone who had many values and beliefs that differed from my own has finally forced me to face some things about myself that I never wanted to look at. Grounded in my body is a Self-Other conflict that reverberates with the history of the Master-Slave relationship in America. It is this strong resonance within our culture that I will continue to explore.

NOTES

These artist's pages are the responsibility of Clarissa Sligh. Names of organizations have been changed except where permission to use them have been granted. Because Jake saw himself as male, the masculine pronoun is used in most of this text except where I use quotes. However, during the first six months that we worked together, I saw him as a woman and had a difficult time referencing him as male.

Reference: William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery, 1860; with a new foreword and biographical essay by R. J. M. Blackett* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p. 19.

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