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Detransition as Conversion Therapy: A Survivor Speaks Out



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Photo of the Author taken on the way home from Blood and Visions, a gathering for detransitioned women.

For seven years I lived as a detransitioned woman. I believed that I had transitioned as a way to cope with trauma and internalized sexism, that I had been trying to escape the stigma of being a butch lesbian in a homophobic society. I thought I had to reclaim womanhood in order to heal and find wholeness. I was part of a larger community of detransitioned women and re-identified women, a community heavily influenced by radical feminist and lesbian separatist theory and culture. Together we worked to support each other in healing from “female disidentification” and reconnecting with being women. Many of us shared our stories online, through blogs, videos and other media.

I blogged and made videos under the name CrashChaosCats, or Crash for short, presented workshops and helped organize in-person gatherings for detransitioned and re-identified women. I was profiled by *The Outline* and was one of the detrans women interviewed by Katie Herzog for her controversial article on detransitioning that appeared in *The Stranger*. I believed I was doing important work, educating people that gender dysphoria could be caused by trauma and sexism and healed by using psychological means rather than medical transition.

Now I see my detransition as a kind of anti-trans conversion therapy, grounded in transphobic radical feminist ideology. Like all forms of conversion therapy, it was unsuccessful and deeply damaging. I have indeed been hurt by trauma and living in a sexist, homophobic society but coming to believe that I needed to give up being

trans in order to heal those wounds only caused further damage. I can see now that I wasted years of my life trying to fix a part of myself that was never broken and suffering needlessly in the process. Even worse, I fear that I've misled other people into engaging in similar self-destructive practices. I presented myself as a detransition success story but the truth is that detransitioning did not work for me and was an act of self-denial and rejection.

I followed the radical feminist prescription for "curing" transmasculinity. I tried living as a butch woman who was completely woman and female-identified. I worked to expand my definition of womanhood and examine the effects of living in a misogynistic and homophobic society. I did "consciousness raising" with other detrans women, where we processed our experiences through a radical feminist lens. I challenged any internal sense of gender that wasn't female, learning how to reinterpret, disconnect from and/or suppress my feelings. I learned to emphasize any commonalities I shared with women since one of the central problems of "female disidentification" was feeling different from them. I sought out strong gender nonconforming women as friends, mentors and role models. I read a ton of books on radical feminism and radical lesbian culture and attended lesbian feminist gatherings. At one point, most of the people I hung out with on the regular basis were radical feminist lesbians.

At first it seemed to work, though it helped that my sense of gender had already shifted in a more female direction on its own before I ever considered myself detransitioned. I had long felt like a blend of transmasculine and butch but had spent most of my young adulthood living as a trans man, largely because I worried people would not understand my gender complexity. In my mid-twenties, I started feeling more like a dyke and wishing I could be seen as a genderqueer female person. I had never lived as an adult butch woman and was curious about exploring that possibility. I didn't think of myself as detransitioning, more as exploring and experimenting with my gender.

After embracing radical feminism, I rejected my gender complexity in favor of declaring myself a woman who'd been so badly hurt by sexism that I'd developed a sense of having multiple genders in order to cope. I saw my butch womanhood as being my one true gender and treated any sense of being male or genderqueer as a symptom of trauma and dissociation. My sense of being other genders never entirely went away but my sense of being a woman was strong and reinforced by other

detransitioned women and radical feminists. For years I managed to convince myself that I'd finally figured myself out and was on the path to healing.

Eventually though, my transmasculinity and genderqueerness came back with a vengeance. At first I interpreted this as an episode of gender dysphoria, brought on by stress in my life. In the detrans women's community, gender dysphoria is separated from trans identity and treated like a symptom to be managed much like ex-gays draw a distinction from experiencing same-sex attraction and identifying as gay. We rejected the whole concept of gender identity. Biological sex was real but gender identity was false consciousness stemming from gender roles and sex stereotypes. We weren't trying to change gender identity as much as we were trying to eradicate it, privileging radical feminist theory over our internal sense of self. So I dutifully treated my re-emerging gender identities as delusions to work through. Living as a woman felt increasingly wrong but I was terrified of giving up the life I had built as a detransitioned lesbian with a prominent role in the detrans women's community. I struggled with these feelings, doing my best to keep them in check, for three years.

After a certain point it was just too much. Why did I have to work so hard to be a woman if that's what I really was? Why did it even matter so much what gender I felt like? Why expend so much time and energy trying to micromanage my thoughts and feelings, my very sense of self? It wasn't making me happy, it was making me miserable. I felt like I was brainwashing myself, trying to change what I was to make other people happy. I knew if I came out as trans, many people I knew and cared about would see me as delusional. I couldn't imagine staying in the detrans and radical lesbian feminist communities as an out trans person. In the end, I chose to trust my ability to know myself and disengaged from my old communities.

While I was still in the detrans women's community, I encountered resistance to questioning and doubting my detransition. I didn't feel free to come to my own conclusions about what my feelings meant and how best to respond to them. People in the community acted as if they knew what I was and what my experiences meant better than I did. There was extra pressure on me because I was considered an influential voice in the community and people were concerned that I could lead people astray if I said the "wrong" things. Staying on message was more important than about being honest about my life.

Multiple detransitioned women were threatened when I started making peace with my past transition and decided that it hadn't been as damaging as I had initially thought. I used to hate myself for having transitioned and felt deep despair about it. Sometimes I felt like transitioning had messed my life up so badly that I wanted to die. I gradually realized that transitioning in the past in no way prevented me from having the kind of life I wanted. I realized I still would've faced many of the same problems in my life even if I hadn't transitioned. I understood why I had gotten upset in the past but when I put things in perspective my past transition stopped seeming like a disaster and more like just another part of my life. This was an important positive shift for me, a huge relief. I no longer felt depressed or suicidal about transitioning. I was happy that my past was no longer causing me tremendous pain.

Instead of being glad for me, other detrans women acted as if I was crazy and in denial. They didn't seem to care that I was happier accepting my transition instead of seeing it as a problem. To me, it seemed like they liked me better when I was still in pain, that they cared more about painting medical transition as being harmful and destructive. I felt like they cared more about attacking transition than they did with helping people heal from past trauma and get on with their lives.

Today, I'm working to heal from the damage of trying to erase an important part of myself. Disconnecting from the detransitioned women's community has given me space to start processing what happened to me. I internalized the beliefs of people who think people like me shouldn't exist and tried to live my life in accordance with those beliefs. I was a true believer and invested years of my life into building and promoting the detransitioned women's community. Disengaging from my former community is confusing and painful. I'm still learning to trust my own feelings and perceptions, my ability to know who I am and what's best for myself.

I don't know why I feel like different genders but I know that I spent years trying to get rid of these feelings and it didn't work. I tried because I really believed that was what I needed to do to heal from trauma. I was in pain and I wanted it to stop. I fell for a lie because I was desperate and I promoted the lie because it seemed to work. It worked until it didn't. I can't stop being trans and being trans was never the problem. My problem is that I live in a society that treats people like me like we're crazy and broken. Transphobic people say they just want us to accept ourselves as we are but that's a lie. They want us to reject who we are and accept their version of us. They

want to destroy us from the inside out.

Ideologically motivated detransition is conversion therapy. It teaches that trans people are unhealthy, inauthentic and dysfunctional and that transition is self-destructive and unsatisfying. It rejects modifying the body through medical transition but attempts to change the mind in order to conform to the ideals of the ideology. It tries to convince trans people that our sense of self is false, that we can't have happy or satisfying lives as trans people. It's part of a backlash against trans rights just as the ex-gay movement was a backlash against gay rights.

As I've worked through how detransitioning harmed me, I've become increasingly concerned about how my actions have affected others. I'm deeply sorry for any harm I caused by promoting transphobic beliefs and practices. I worry that I helped to reinforce ignorance and hostility towards trans people in the larger culture. I worry that I encouraged trans people to deny and hurt themselves. I've long intended to speak out but wanted to make sure I was in a stable space emotionally and gave myself time to process the experience. I can't stay silent as I watch detransitioned people like Keira Bell fight to restrict trans healthcare and promote conversion therapy for trans youth while other detrans people cheer her on. I feel an urgent need to raise awareness of the dangers of ideologically motivated detransition and do what I can to help people understand it so that they can resist it more effectively.

And finally I want people who've been hurt by ideologically motivated detransition to know that they are not alone. I know I'm not the only one who's been through this. I don't want anyone to feel trapped and isolated like I did. If detransitioning isn't making your life better you can stop. You're the only one who knows who you are and what you need and to hell with anyone who tells you differently. Trust in your ability to know yourself and do whatever you need to do to be happy.

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