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When Girls Will Be Boys

By ALISSA QUART

It was late on a rainy fall day, and a college freshman named Rey was showing me the new tattoo on his arm. It commemorated his 500-mile hike through Europe the previous summer, which happened also to be, he said, the last time he was happy. We sat together for a while in his room talking, his tattoo of a piece with his spiky brown hair, oversize tribal earrings and very baggy jeans. He showed me a photo of himself and his girlfriend kissing, pointed out his small drum kit, a bass guitar that lay next to his rumpled clothes and towels and empty bottles of green tea, one full of dried flowers, and the ink self-portraits and drawings of nudes that he had tacked to the walls. Thick jasmine incense competed with his cigarette smoke. He changed the music on his laptop with the melancholy, slightly startled air of a college boy on his own for the first time.

Rey's story, though, had some unusual dimensions. The elite college he began attending last year in New York City, with its academically competitive, fresh-faced students, happened to be a women's school, Barnard. That's because when Rey first entered the freshman class, he was a woman.

Rey, who asked that neither his last name nor his given name be used to protect his and his family's privacy, grew up in Chappaqua, the affluent Westchester suburb that is home to the Clintons, and had a relatively ordinary, middle-class Jewish childhood. Rey, as he now calls himself, loved his younger brother, his parents were together and he was a good student, excelling in English and history. But he always had the distinct feeling that he wasn't the sex he was supposed to be. As a kid, he was often mistaken for a boy, which was "mostly cool," Rey said. "When I was 5, I told my parents not to correct people when strangers thought I was a boy. I was never a girl, really — I questioned my own gender, and other people also questioned my gender for me." When Rey entered puberty, he felt the loss of the "tomboy" sobriquet acutely.

"My body changed in freshman year of high school, and it made me depressed," Rey said. That year, he started to wonder whether he was really meant to become a woman. His friends in high school were almost all skater boys and musicians, and he related to them as if he were one of them. He began to define himself as "omnisexual," although he was mostly attracted to women.

The idea that he might actually want to transition from female to male began to take shape for Rey when he was 14 or 15; he can't quite remember when exactly. "A transmale speaker guy" gave a talk at a meeting of his high school's Gay Straight Alliance, and Rey was inspired. Then he took a typical step for someone going to high school in the first years of this century. He went home and typed "transgender" into Google.

At the end of his freshman year in high school, he met Melissa, a student at [Smith College](#) who was back in Westchester for summer break and later became his girlfriend. During one of their days together, Melissa, who was immersed in campus gender activism, mentioned the concept of being a "transman" and spoke of her transmale friends. Rey confided his questions about his gender identity to her, and she encouraged him to explore them further. For most of high school, Rey spent hours online reading about transgendered people and their lives. "The Internet is the best thing for trans people," he said. "Living in the suburbs, online groups were an access point." He also started reading memoirs of transgendered people. He asked Melissa to explain the gender theory she was learning in college.

In his senior year, he took on the name Rey. At 17, he finally felt ready to come out as trans to his family, who

according to Rey struggled to understand his new identity. Around that time, he also visited a clinic in Manhattan, hoping to start hormone therapy. He was told that unless he wanted his parents involved in the process, he'd have to wait until he was 18. In the meantime, Rey began to apply to colleges. He wanted to go to "a hippie school," as he put it, yet he felt pressure to choose a school like Barnard that hewed to an [Ivy League](#) profile. Though he decided on Barnard, he still planned to start on testosterone as soon as he turned 18. When I asked him why he wanted to start hormone therapy so soon, he replied simply, "You live your life and you feel like a boy." Of course, living life like a boy is not what an elite women's college has historically been about.

At 18, Rey is part of a growing population of transgender students at the nation's colleges and universities. While still a rarity, young women who become men in college, also known as transmen or transmales, have grown in number over the last 10 years. According to Brett-Genny Janiczek Beemyn, director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who has studied trans students on college campuses, adults who wished to transition historically did so in middle age. Today a larger percentage of transitions occur in adolescence or young adulthood. The National Center for Transgender Equality estimates that between a quarter of a percent and 1 percent of the U.S. population is transgender — up to three million Americans — though other estimates are lower and precise figures are difficult to come by. Still, the growing number of young people who transition when they are teenagers or very young adults has placed a new pressure on colleges, especially women's colleges, to accommodate them.

The number of young people who openly identify as transgendered has grown for a few reasons. Some parents of young children who are "gender nonconforming" — usually children who identify psychologically with the opposite sex but also children who have hermaphroditic traits, like indeterminate sex organs — now allow their kids to choose whether they are referred to as "he" or "she" and whether to wear boys' or girls' clothing. And some of these parents, under a doctor's supervision, have even begun to administer hormone blockers to prevent the arrival of secondary sex characteristics until a "gender variant" child is old enough to make permanent choices. The Internet also offers greater access to information about transmale and gender-variant identities.

In addition, 147 colleges and universities nationwide now include "gender identity and expression" in their nondiscrimination policies, and students will often use gender-neutral pronouns like "ze" and "hir" — especially if they post on campus message boards. At [Wesleyan](#) last year, students initiated a survey of bathrooms, checking to see if they were transgender-friendly — open to all sexes. Many colleges now have Transgender Days of Remembrance in memory of victims of gender-identity-related hate crimes. Students at the [University of Vermont](#) hold a yearly "Translating Identity Conference" for trans college students that draws hundreds of people from around the country. The increasing number of trans college students has even given rise to a surprisingly deft reality television show, "Transgeneration," on the Sundance Channel, which featured a transmale student at Smith College.

The conventional thinking is that trans people feel they are "born in the wrong body." But today many students who identify as trans are seeking not simply to change their sex but to create an identity outside or between established genders — they may refuse to use any gender pronouns whatsoever or take a gender-neutral name but never modify their bodies chemically or surgically. These students are also considered part of the trans community, though they are known as either gender nonconforming or genderqueer rather than transmen or transmale.

At many of America's first-tier women's colleges, the growth of the trans community has led to campus workshops on transgender identity. According to students at Smith, a good number of restrooms have been made over as "gender neutral." And some professors make sure to ask students to fill out slips indicating their

preferred names and pronouns. Students at several women's colleges have also created trans groups to reflect their experiences and political views. According to one transmale student I talked to at Wellesley, there are at least 15 gender-nonconforming students at the college, ranging from full-on trans to genderqueer, who have formed their own group. Other women's colleges, like Smith, have in the last few years had on-campus gender-nonconforming groups with up to 30 members, more than 1 percent of that school's population.

Which doesn't mean it isn't sometimes a struggle to be trans or gender-nonconforming on campus. Many trans students feel themselves to be excluded or isolated at women's schools and at coed colleges. Some talk of being razzed or insulted by fellow students. And even within a college's gender-nonconforming population, students are often divided among those who define themselves as men but don't transition medically, those who do and those who prefer not to define themselves as either male or female.

These difficulties are a natural part of being a minority that is still fighting for acceptance. But trans students' problems can also be institutional. The presence of trans students at women's colleges can't help raising the question of whether — or to what degree — these colleges can serve students who no longer see themselves as women.

From his first week at Barnard, Rey told me, he felt he was struggling. The women on campus seemed to Rey to be socially conservative and archly feminine, and he felt he had to seek solace elsewhere. At the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center in downtown Manhattan — the medical facility for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people that he visited while he was still in high school — he began to get biweekly testosterone “T” shots (he turned 18 in September). Rey had psychological counseling elsewhere first; typically a letter of referral from a mental-health professional is required before anyone between 18 and 24 can receive hormone therapy. Rey also began to bind his breasts. But binding hurt, he said; it made it hard for him to breathe. He especially hated “having to alter your body every morning so you can go through the world and people will accept you.”

But as a transmale student in a sea of women at Barnard, he felt alone. He longed to be with his girlfriend, Melissa, and with transmale friends, some of whom, like Rey, were attending women's colleges. Even as he sought to adopt a more conventionally male appearance, he wanted to maintain his ties with his former self. “I am all for not rubbing out my past as female,” he told me.

But it was not to be that simple. As a transmale college student, he was something of a pioneer. And he began to hit some walls.

In the first week of September, he found out that his roommates had complained to the college's freshman housing director about being asked to share their rooms with a man. They wanted Rey to find somewhere else to live. According to Dorothy Denburg, the dean who spoke to Rey about the situation, these young women were disturbed when Rey told them on the first day “that he was a transboy and wanted to be referred to by male pronouns.” Rey's roommates had, after all, chosen to attend a women's college in order to live and be educated in the company of other women. Barnard doesn't have singles for freshmen. As Rey saw it, he was simply shut out by his two roommates — and by the rest of the school. A week after learning of his roommates' disapproval, Rey, together with the dean and his parents, decided that Rey should transfer to Columbia's School of General Studies.

Rey felt lost. He slept on people's couches and stayed with one friend, a Columbia student and fellow trans activist, for a week. The story of his rooming travails ultimately wound up on the gossip pages of The New York Post. The Post squib cast Rey as an infiltrator in one of the last girls-with-pearls bastions.

“They were very typical feminine girls,” explained Rey. “I didn't fit in. It's why I didn't hang out with straight

girls for most of high school — I hung out with queer women. Around the Barnard women, I felt extremely other.”

Rey described the days that followed as “the worst semester ever.” As his new hormone regime began to take effect, he started to go through male puberty, which meant increased bone mass and a deepening voice and facial hair. He struggled to lead the normal life of an arty college student: eating vegan, going to clubs, keeping his grades up. Only recently, Rey says, has his life has brightened. Indeed the transformation from the person he was to who he has become is startling. The second time we met, on a street corner near Columbia in Upper Manhattan, was a cold but sunny day in January, and Rey was aglow, smiling and laughing. Accompanied by his girlfriend, Melissa, now a graceful college senior, he greeted me with a hug.

The reason for this cheer, he said, was that he finally felt on the way to becoming who he really is. The testosterone shots he had received every other week since October had lowered his voice a few octaves. He was in the process of legally changing his name to a male name, although he couldn’t decide whether to go casual (Rey) or Old Testament (Asher). And in December Rey underwent what he called “chest reconstruction surgery,” also known as “top surgery,” which he paid for out of pocket.

Melissa helped Rey through it, feeding him antibiotics and massaging his postsurgery chest with arnica cream. He joined a campus trans organization, GendeRevolution. In a few short months, he had become a full-blown activist. He quit smoking. To cap it off, he was bar-mitzvahed in Israel in January. He’d had his bat mitzvah at 13, but as Rey put it, he didn’t feel “connected to the experience.” He was bar-mitzvahed without his parents in attendance, but he took the rite of passage to heart. After all, at 13 he’d become a woman. Now, at 18, he was a man.

Despite the seriousness of the issues Rey has dealt with, all in such a short time, he often seemed like a giddy teenager, probably because he still was one. Clad in his usual uniform of baggy pants and a B-Boy cap covered with images of euros, he gossiped about his friends, music, sex and food, from time to time throwing his arm around Melissa, who is pixielike, slim and Rey’s height — a little over five feet. She was wearing skinny jeans and ballet flats. She was so supportive of Rey’s transformation that she was taken aback when I asked if his period of postoperative recovery had been hard for her.

“He’s so much happier now,” she said. Even though Melissa always defined herself as a lesbian, she said her partner’s transition made sense to her. Part of the couple’s sangfroid is generational — she and Rey see themselves as genderqueer rather than gay. For them, sexual orientation is fluid. Like some of their peers, Melissa and Rey want to be — and sometimes imagine they already are — part of the first generation to transcend gender.

On the face of it, it’s not surprising that students like Rey would choose to attend a women’s college. Same-sex colleges have always been test beds for transformations among American women. Set up as places where women could flourish without men, colleges like Barnard, Wellesley, Smith and Mount Holyoke have always had dual personalities, serving both as finishing schools and as incubators of American feminism. Smith College’s alumnae include not only Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan but also Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and Catharine MacKinnon.

The schools that decided to remain single-sex in the 1970s, when many colleges around the country went coed, represented a significant and even controversial challenge to liberal ideas about gender equality. And in refashioning their identities for the time, many became loci for the interrogation of gender roles. It was, after all, at all-female schools that many young women first began to question the very notion of femininity. And this questioning found echoes in the curriculum. Scholars like Esther Newton, Gayle Rubin, Anne Fausto-

Sterling and Judith Butler ushered in an era that reconceived gender as a social construct, distinct from both a person's sex and sexuality. For Butler and others, femaleness did not automatically produce femininity and maleness did not produce masculinity: gender was fluid and variable, something to be fashioned, and could shift in character depending on the culture or the time period. As some see it, the presence of trans students at single-sex colleges is simply a logical extension of this intellectual tradition.

Indeed, as one transmale student I spoke to at Wellesley pointed out, women's colleges are uniquely suited to transgender students. "There's no safer place for transmen to be than a women's college because there's no actual physical threat to us," he told me, adding, "I have more in common with women because of that shared experience than I do with men." And even though Rey chose to leave Barnard for a coed school, he also says that women's schools can — and should — act as havens for transmale students, that they are, in fact, natural beacons for trans people, because "feminists and trans activists are both interested in gender."

In a sense, transgender and genderqueer students could be said merely to be holding women's colleges to their word: to fully support women's exploration of gender, even if that exploration ends with students no longer being female-identified. As Judith Halberstam, a professor of English and gender studies at the [University of Southern California](#) and the author of "Female Masculinity," put it, feminist theory offers students a way to think about gender as performance, to create a trans self or a genderqueer one — and give that self contours, definition — in a way that was simply unavailable 30 years ago. Indeed, Rey discovered his own trans identity reading queer theory, and even transitioning to be a man hasn't changed his core sense of himself. "I'm still queer even though I am a man now — it's the beauty of the term," Rey said.

"I think gender is a spectrum — gender is more complicated than sex," Rey continued. He sees everyone, and not just transmen, as having "their own gender," just as they might have their own personality or temperament. Rey's point isn't merely academic. A good number of gender nonconforming students I spoke to at women's colleges agreed with him. Most did not have operations but rather defined gender simply by how they experienced it, seeing themselves as existing on a "gender continuum" with their more conventionally feminine college friends. I met with one such student, Jordan Akerley, a 22-year-old senior at Wellesley. As we sat in the student-run on-campus cafe where Akerley works, Akerley explained what it is like to live out a theory of identity that doesn't exactly conform to one gender or the other.

"I find pronouns cumbersome and self-limiting," Akerley told me, which is why friends use the name Jordan, a name that Akerley says she intends to make official this year. Akerley, a co-captain of the school's soccer team, takes no hormones and has no plans to have an operation. Akerley's look and entire manner is quite unremarkable, even conservative: hair combed in a modified Tin Tin do, sporty, plain cotton shirt, jeans and sneakers. The only sign of an "alternative" or outsider identity — other than appearing masculine enough to be frequently mistaken on campus for a female student's boyfriend — is Akerley's eyebrow ring. Akerley's affect could be that of an aspiring politician: amiable, physically attractive, clean cut, inoffensive and articulate.

"My identity is fluid; it may evolve and fluctuate," Akerley explained. "My preference is not to use gender pronouns. My work is not always grammatically correct because of the lack of pronouns."

Though women's colleges may seem a haven for trans or gender-nonconforming students, accommodating such students requires balancing a complex set of needs and expectations — inside and outside the college. Barnard, like many women's colleges, has an admissions policy of accepting only "legal" women. The college's president, Judith Shapiro, who wrote an article on transsexualism in the 1980s, is clearly sympathetic to the trans population in general, but when I spoke to her she wondered aloud why a transmale or male-identified student "would want to be in a woman's college." She went on to explain her position this way: "Having been very involved in second-wave feminism, I am interested in gender revolutionaries, but I still think gender is a

major category in our society.” In many ways, Shapiro could be said to represent the position women’s colleges now find themselves in: caught between wanting to embrace a campus minority that their own interrogation of gender roles has helped to shape and defending the value of institutions centered on the distinct experience of being female.

Colleges must also navigate the attitudes and expectations of their alumnae. While some alumnae have readily accepted the presence of trans students on their campuses, others, like Suzanne Corriell and Regis Ahern, graduates of Mount Holyoke, see it as a betrayal of the foundational principles of their alma mater. Corriell and Ahern recently wrote an angry letter to *The Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly*, charging that admitting transmale students was, in effect, a way of “passively going coed” and that the “lifestyle choices” of these students was a bald negation of a women’s college charter. Trans students, they wrote, were simply “men seeking to take advantage of Mount Holyoke’s liberal and accepting atmosphere.”

When I called Corriell, who is 28, at the law library at the [University of Richmond](#), where she works, she explained her feelings to me this way: “I am a strong believer in women’s education, and I think the colleges are a dying breed that need protection. I respect their agenda, which is educating women.” She paused, then said: “Educating trans students in a same-sex residential community produces difficulty — when a student no longer identifies as a woman, the privilege to attend these schools is lost. Men have lots of schools they can go to — why must transmen go to women’s schools?”

Of course, many trans students identify first as women — as lesbians or feminist activists. They are attracted to women’s schools precisely because of their reputation as safe harbors for exploring these identities. As a result, many transmale students apply to women’s schools and attend them before they have fully come out as “gender nonconforming” — and this is likely to be the case for years to come.

Denburg, the Barnard dean, acknowledges that women’s colleges have always been places “where women can explore definitions and dimensions of gender.” But it is only in the last five years of her tenure as dean, she says, that she has encountered transmale students. She had, she said, no objection to Rey’s attending Barnard. The school has helped other gender-nonconforming students, among them a resident adviser in his senior year, who had to inform his female dorm mates about his gender transition over the summer. Denburg described her work with these students “as an educational journey for me as well, that has helped me to better understand the drive of someone who feels they are in the wrong body.”

That said, Barnard does not have the kind of groups for trans students or awareness campaigns and gender-neutral bathrooms that some of the other women’s colleges do. And it has not been as affiliated with women’s and gender activism as some of its sister schools. Rey’s case, as Denburg put it, “caught us off guard,” mostly because administrators had never encountered a student who wanted to transition physically at such a young age. To Denburg, 18 still seems very young for such a decision.

Many people would agree that going on hormones carries risks: there are few studies on the long-term effects of hormone therapies on transmen. Some transmen in their 20s and 30s have told me they worry about the hormones’ potential side effects — an increase in “bad” cholesterol and the risk of heart disease and stroke. For transmen, finding appropriate health care is complicated by the fact that student health services typically need to refer such students to outside clinics or hospitals for their care — and transmen may need additional insurance or be required to bear at least some of the medical costs themselves.

Rey always expected to go off-campus for his transition. He wound up being operated on by a private surgeon in New York City. (He received no “bottom surgery,” as it is known — few transmen do, in part because the operation is thought to be too rudimentary and in part because many transmen view it as unnecessary.) While

many gender-nonconforming students don't have "top surgery" in their freshman years, they may still struggle with their colleges' medical services, not because they want specialized treatments but because they want health care that is sensitive to their new identities. As one gender-nonconforming student complained to me, he hated that health services insisted on treating him "like a girl."

Colleges, trans activists and advocates say, are even less prepared for advising students on how their gender-variant identities may affect their futures, including their professional lives. After all, many states don't have protection for gender-nonconforming people in the workplace, and "gender identity" was recently dropped from the 2007 Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or ENDA. "There's no professional development for trans kids at colleges," said Shannon Sennott, a founder of Translate, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit group that holds workshops on trans awareness at women's colleges. "The majority disappear into big cities, working as bartenders with advanced degrees because there's real prejudice against trans workers." Hadley Smith, a recent Wellesley graduate and a Translate founder who describes himself as gender-nonconforming, said that unemployment or limited employment is par for the course for many transgendered people, but those limits may seem starker when high-achieving graduates from educationally competitive schools like Smith College feel, out of fear of discriminating employers, that they have to abandon, at least temporarily, their professional aspirations.

Some transmale students ultimately go "stealth" after graduation, not mentioning their earlier lives as women. When I asked Rey how he hoped to handle it, he said he had no intention of hiding and was planning to be out as a transman for the rest of his life. With all the bravado of youth, he said: "I won't get a career that I can't be out and trans in. I'm not planning to go into business.

"I've learned not to try to see my future — to do the best I can in the space I am in," he continued, and then added shyly, "I would like to, you know, make public art."

On a winter afternoon, I visited Rey at his new workplace at Columbia University's Office of Multicultural Affairs, where he was organizing a series of trans awareness events on campus. Rey was being paid by the college to create the series, and at the moment he had two chores on his list: booking a transmale photographer as a speaker and creating signage for gender-neutral bathrooms. To achieve the latter, Rey was busy sketching possible new symbols. Melissa, his girlfriend, was helping him. First they turned the familiar female stick figure into a rocket ship, making her legs into a flame. Rey created a few variations of the sign with a ballpoint pen. Then he drew a confused-looking person standing in front of both a male and a female bathroom, not knowing which one to pick. Next, he tried a single circle with the male and female symbols attached to it. Melissa laughed mockingly at the drawing of the confused man, but she nodded her head in approval at the two other symbols.

The dynamic between the two is often like this — teasingly supportive. Earlier at lunch, Melissa joked about whether they were even in a relationship, "I'm not sure: Rey doesn't do labels." Then she told Rey, "I've saved 20 voice mails of your voice changing over the last four months." He looked at her adoringly as they ate French fries in sync: Melissa was not only his girlfriend but also the historian of his identity.

"Before I was on hormones, people would get confused when I spoke over the phone — they thought I was male, and then they'd start asking questions about how old I was," Rey said. "I didn't want to stay a prepubescent boy."

When talk turned to the couple's plans for the future, Melissa was more concerned about Rey leaving "wet towels on the floor," she said, and "tracking mud in the house" than about his medical transition. His lack of housekeeping skills was particularly on her mind, since the two are planning to move in together over the

summer. “We’ll stay together,” Melissa said. “That’s unless you go gay . . . again.” She laughed. She was talking about the possibility of Rey’s coming out a second time — going from being a woman who loves women to a man who loves women to a man who loves men. The remark was meant lightly, but nonetheless it got to the heart of the radical gender leaps both she and Rey were making in their everyday lives.

Then Rey grew more serious.

“Some transmen want to be seen as men — they want to be accepted as born men,” he said. “I want to be accepted as a transman — my brain is not gendered. There’s this crazy gender binary that’s built into all of life, that there are just two genders that are acceptable. I don’t want to have to fit into that.”

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