

Paisley Currah and Tara  
Mulqueen  
**Securitizing Gender:  
Identity, Biometrics, and  
Transgender Bodies at the  
Airport**

IT IS WIDELY ASSUMED THAT THE MORE INFORMATION surveillance apparatuses can collect about an individual, the less risk he or she poses. It is also widely assumed that an individual's gender can be, in former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's now infamous taxonomy of information, one of the "known knowns." But if identity verification lessens risk, what happens when epistemic uncertainty about gender classification—relied on by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as a first order metric of identity—enters the picture? In this paper, we examine how gender figures into and potentially disrupts the link between identity verification and security. The Secure Flight Program, introduced in 2009, requires passengers to provide airlines with their gender classification before they fly. The "Advanced Imaging Technology" program, put into wide use a year later, detects not only hidden material but physical anomalies, including unexpected configurations of gendered bodies. Our analysis centers

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## Summary of Comments on CurrahMulqueenV1.pdf

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on one very particular situation: the confusion that erupts at the airport when TSA officials perceive a conflict between the gender marked on one's papers, the image of one's body produced by a machine, and/or an individual's perceived gender presentation.

Gender has been so deeply naturalized—as immutable, as easily apprehended, and as existing before and outside of political arrangements—for so long that its installation in identity verification practices is taken for granted. In what follows, we describe how two separate TSA programs “operationalize” gender, and we examine what happens when different epistemic sources of knowledge about gender—individual narrative or gender presentation, the classification as M (male) or F (female) on the document one carries, and one's body—clash in the security assemblage of the airport. As part of state security apparatuses' unceasing quest for more and better information, both programs, we argue, *securitize* gender, the former intentionally and the latter unintentionally. These TSA programs illustrate the impossibility of predicting with absolute certainty that something about a person, even something ostensibly sourced from or lodged in the body such as gender, will stay the same over time.<sup>1</sup> We conclude by suggesting that the effects of gender's unreliability as an unchanging measure of identity do not constitute a problem for the TSA but rather for the individuals whose narratives, documents, and bodies reveal the mutability of the category. When meanings are contested, as Hobbes says, it is authority, not truth, that makes the law.

In examining this particular question, we do not seek to present an all-encompassing molar narrative to account for the many different ways that state actors produce, reconfigure, and police particular gender arrangements. However, in this historical moment both technologies and expanded police powers have greatly intensified what Nikolas Rose has labeled the “securitization of identity.” Thus, looking at the collision between what Foucault called large “transactional realities”—in our case, the transactional realities of “gender,” “the state,” and “the body”—might tell us something about what happens when the apparently unremarkable practices of state identity management

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work alongside the heightened scrutiny of bodies in the “war on terror” (Foucault 2008: 297; Rose 1999: 240). Certainly, this sort of analysis could be carried out in relation to any number of “unruly” categories (Caplan 2001: 50); here, we have chosen to focus on how state actors rely on gender to classify people and what ensues when different metrics for gender produce less, rather than more, certainty. We suggest that securitizing gender does not necessarily secure identity, and indeed may destabilize it.<sup>2</sup>

### **THE SECURE FLIGHT AND ADVANCED IMAGING TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS**

Implemented in 2009, the TSA’s “Secure Flight” program requires consumers to provide the airline with their name, their date of birth, and their gender exactly as they appear on government-issued identity documents when they book flights. The airlines then transmit that information to the TSA. Before allowing a boarding pass to be issued, the TSA will compare that data against the watch lists maintained by the FBI’s Terrorism Screening Center and confirm that the passenger is not on any of the lists. To pass into a “sterile” area in the airport, individuals must present an identity document that exactly matches the information already given to the airline. By providing more discrete data points of reference, according to TSA officials, “passengers can significantly decrease the likelihood of watch list misidentification” (TSA 2011). According to a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, from December 2003 to January 2006, of the tens of thousands of individuals who were identified for further screening at the airport as well as in visa application processes, roughly half were false positives, primarily because their names were similar to those on the Terrorist Watch List (GAO 2006: 13). According to the TSA, adding date of birth and gender to the pieces of information that are collected will reduce the number of false positives without increasing risk and thus ensure “Secure Flight.”

The notion that one’s classification as male or female will not change is such a widely held belief that gender classification has been

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part of state practices of recognition since the earliest days of modern state formations (Noiriel 2001). In addition, gender has been a central mechanism for the distribution of rights, obligations, and resources, including voting, registration for the draft, and eligibility for pensions. States' powers to classify individuals by gender is essential to much state-sponsored discrimination based on sexual orientation: for bans on same-sex marriage to work, officials need to know the gender of the parties applying for marriage licenses. In the United States, an individual's gender marker as M or F is included on all state-issued identity documents or in records associated with the document. But for people often grouped under the term "transgender," the gender marker on a piece of state-issued ID can be troublesome: a transgender woman presenting herself as female at the airport, might, unlike other women, have an M on her passport. Conversely, someone who looks like a man might show a driver's license with the gender marker of F.

While the heightened intensity of such gender scrutiny is new, the problem itself is not: the lack of a neat correlation between an individual's body, her gender identity and presentation, and the identity document(s) she carries has long posed an obstacle for those whose gender identity does not correspond to social expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth. As Currah points out elsewhere,

*Sex changes.* When some individuals cross borders, walk into a government office to apply for benefits, get a driver's license, go to prison, sign up for selective service, try to get married, or have any interaction with any arm of the state, the legal sex of some people can and often does switch from male to female, or female to male. To complicate matters even more, almost every state agency—from federal to municipal—has the authority to decide its own rules for sex classification. The lack of a uniform standard for classifying people as male or female means that some state agencies will recognize the new gender of people who wish to change their gender and some will not. For most

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people, this does not appear to be a problem. For others, it is (Currah forthcoming).

For example, in New York City, the policy of homeless shelters is to recognize one's new gender and so to house transgender women in women's shelters, and transgender men in men's shelters; the policy of corrections system, on the other hand, basically ensures that most trans-women are segregated with male prisoners and most trans-men with female prisoners.


The criteria for gender reclassification on identity documents is far from uniform; some agencies require "sexual reassignment surgery" before they will change the gender classification while others do not. In 2010, for example, the U.S. Department of State changed its policy for gender re-reclassification on U.S. passports and eliminated the requirement for genital surgery (Department of State 2010). But in New York City, the applicant must submit evidence that "convertive" surgery has been performed before officials will change the gender marker on a birth certificate (Currah and Moore 2009). Other agencies will not change the gender classification in any case: officials in Idaho, Ohio, or Tennessee will never amend the gender markers on the birth certificates they issue. For transgender people, the immense number of state actors defining sex ensnares them in a Kafkaesque web of official identity contradiction and chaos. As one woman testifying before a New York City Council hearing put it,



I do not suffer from gender dysphoria. I suffer from bureaucratic dysphoria. My ID does not match my appearance. I worry every time I apply for a job, every time I authorize a credit card check, every time I buy a plane ticket, every time I buy a beer at the corner deli. I have changed my name but my gender continues to be officially and bureaucratically M (Currah 2009: 254).

Michelle Billies calls this experience "identification threat," which she describes as "a daily contest, a struggle over control of

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one's body as well as the definition of societal membership" (2010: 2). When an individual's cultural legibility is not affirmed by their identity papers, even everyday quotidian transactions become moments of vulnerability.

The logic of the Secure Flight program assumes that the gender marker on a piece of ID will lessen confusion—reducing the number of false positive matches to the government watch lists—rather than generate it. But for transgender passengers at the airport, a perceived mismatch between the gender marker on their ID and the gender they present is flagged as an anomaly. And at the airport, an anomaly is an event that automatically triggers higher levels of scrutiny. In the ominous moment when “identification threat” looms as transgender passengers approach the security area, their vulnerability stems from the gender norms operationalized and backed by the force of law at the airport. Conversely, in the eyes of security agents, if something about a passenger's gender appears odd, she is treated as a potential social threat (Billies 2010: 2). As a result of the Secure Flight program, travelers whose gender marker on their identity document does not reflect an airline employee's or TSA agent's perception of their gender—in its embodied totality—risk facing humiliating interrogations, sexually assaultive pat downs, outing to colleagues, even denial of travel. Blogger Katherine Cross presents a phenomenological account of identification threat:

As I engaged in the ritual striptease meant to appease the airline gods at Denver International Airport, standing at the bin that I had claimed as my own with an advert I paid no attention to staring at me from its bottom, a TSA agent walked up to me. I was depositing my grey blazer in the bin, my belt soon to follow, and I grew nervous, my throat tightening as it often does on security lines. But all that the blue uniformed man did was smile at me and say “Good morning to ya, ma'am.” At that moment I knew . . . that I was safe. For now (Cross 2011).

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In response to the Secure Flight program, the leading transgender rights organization tells its constituents in a widely circulated “know your rights” flyer that they have the right to “travel in any gender you wish, whether or not it matches the gender marker on your identification.” But, this widely circulated advisory adds, “the TSA suggests that transgender travelers carry a letter from their doctor” (National Center for Transgender Equality 2010).

In late 2010, the situation faced by transgender travelers was made even worse when the TSA began using advanced imaging technologies at airports in the United States. According to a leading transgender advocacy organization, these machines generate “a three-dimensional image of the passenger’s nude body, including breasts, genitals, buttocks, prosthetics, binding materials and any objects on the person’s body, in an attempt to identify contraband” (NCTE 2009). The stated purpose of body scanning—or “enhanced genital pat downs” for those who refuse to walk through the scanner—is to identify potential threats to the airplane and its passengers. Those threats are hidden on the body. “Terrorists,” warns the Department of Homeland Security in an advisory to security personnel, “will employ novel methods to artfully conceal suicide devices” (2003). Under Secure Flight alone, the point of vulnerability is in the TSA agent’s comparison of an identity document to the individual presenting herself. After clearing that hurdle, passengers whose histories or bodies radically confound gender norms could breathe a little sigh of relief. But with the two new types of technologies deployed—the Whole Body Imaging program uses both “millimeter wave” and “backscatter image” technologies—the body enters the picture, literally. The use of this technology represents a different instantiation of the securitization of gender and erects yet another obstacle to transgender travelers. This program was not put in place to verify identity, yet, for many transgender travelers, the images of the body unintentionally became another site, to paraphrase Fassin and d’Halluin, of *gender* “veridiction,” a place where truth is sought (2005).

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To illustrate, let us return to Cross's vignette, continued from above:

I escorted my belongings, the worn leather boots that could theoretically contain a bomb, the belt that could theoretically contain a trigger mechanism. Or cocaine. My handbag full of feminist literature (now there's something explosive). That was when motion caught my eye and I saw something ominously towering over the old fashioned metal detector. The rounded slate grey hulk of an X-ray machine scanning men and women in a surrendering position, arms held unthreateningly high above their heads. I swallowed thickly wondering if the jig was up, if I would at last have to face transphobia at the airport, if I would have to sit in a room listening to impertinent questions about what was in my knickers (Cross 2011).

As it happened, Cross was not directed to walk through the body imaging scanner that day. But when travelers do get whole body scans or undergo intrusive pat downs (touching breast and genital areas), in some cases TSA agents are seeing in the image or feeling in the pat downs things they do not expect to be there—male genitalia on female travelers, or breasts on male travelers. They are also *not* seeing or feeling things they *do* expect to be there: men without penises, women without breasts. These atypically gendered bodies tend to trigger security responses. A letter written to the head of the TSA from three transgender advocacy groups describes incidents that have been reported to them. They document one case, for example, in which a “male transgender attorney was detained for two hours on his way to an out-of-town court hearing by TSA agents because his intimate anatomy, as indicated by a whole-body image scan and a subsequent pat down, did not conform to agents' expectations of what a man's body should look or feel like.” During his detention, he “was subjected to humiliating personal questions and comments” about the history of his body and

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his identity. But that's not all: a bomb appraisal unit was called in to evaluate him as a potential threat. Eventually, he was allowed to board a later flight. But he was advised to carry "a physician's letter regarding his transgender status whenever he flies" so that the situation could be resolved more quickly the next time (Keisling et al. 2010).

For transgender individuals, unfortunately, these are not isolated events (see, for example, Kirkup 2009).<sup>3</sup> In fact, when Currah mentioned to a friend that he was working on this article, the friend revealed that the same thing had happened to him: after walking through the body scanner, and then undergoing an "enhanced" pat down, he was taken to a small room where agents announced they had found a "gonadal anomaly" that had to be investigated as a potential threat to the security of the airplane before he could board. For other transgender people, the fear of gender-based interrogation is so great that they have chosen not to fly. According to Katherine Rachlin, a clinical psychologist and member of the board of directors of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health,

The full-body scanners became news long before they were actually used in local airports and were a major topic in therapy. Patients anticipated that they would be publicly outed by screeners who saw that there was a mismatch between a person's documents and presentation and their body parts. . . . Patients had increased anxiety and even panic attacks just contemplating the possibilities. Those prone to depression went deeper into depression as their option to travel was taken away (Rachlin 2011).

In describing the anomalies and uncertainties that emerge in the ways that gender has been securitized at the airport, we are not suggesting that these particular events, however distressing to the traveler, are comparable to the gross injustices done to some peoples, individuals, and bodies in the name of national security (nor do we mean to imply that there is no overlap between transgender individuals and victims

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of intensified surveillance and racial profiling) (Queers for Economic Justice 2010). Indeed, the proliferation of sites where individuals can be stopped, searched, and required to verify their identity—as part of the “war on terror” or as a consequence of federal and state initiatives to identify, locate, and deport “illegal aliens”—only amplifies the importance of examining the production and policing of legal identity. Nikolas Rose and Mariana Valverde suggest that there is much to be learned from drilling down into the apparently more “minor, mundane . . . meticulous and detailed work of regulatory apparatuses” (Rose and Valverde 1998: 550). We have followed that suggestion in producing this very granular analysis of conflicts over gender classification in the U.S. airport.

### **TOKEN-BASED IDENTITY VERIFICATION**

Rose coined the phrase “securitization of identity” to describe how “subjects are locked into circuits of control through the multiplication of sites where the exercise of freedom requires proof of legitimate identity” (Rose 1999: 240). The linking of identity with security does not depend on a single entity collecting *all* possible information; it depends, instead, on particular entities in particular contexts collecting only the information most useful for the particular risks being assessed. Thus, the securitization of identity is “dispersed and disorganized” across a “variety of sites and practices” (243, 242). The securitization of identity is an example of what Mariana Valverde and Michael Mopas call “targeted governance” (2004). While state entities once operated with the belief that social problems could be solved through large-scale state intervention, *targeted* governance focuses the resources of the neoliberal state—concerned not with welfare but with risk management—in as efficient a manner as possible. In practice, this has meant an ever greater reliance on information and surveillance technologies which allow the now more limited activities of governance to be carried out, it is believed, with more precision: “a ‘smart,’ specific side-effects free, information-driven utopia of governance” (239). Because the security calculus of state actors holds that more identifying information about

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individuals means less risk, the development of presumably infallible techniques for identity verification has been enrolled in the quest for perfect information. In the United States, the airport has become one of most intensely securitized sites of identity verification (Lyon 2007).

At present, the Secure Flight program, coupled with the No-Fly List and the Terrorist Watch List, is only a crude expression of the dream of perfect information. Identity is not coterminous with identification, and the impossibility of securely linking the two undermines the desire for certitude envisioned in the context of the airport. The notion that an individual's identity can be verified by linking her to identification papers rests on a number of ultimately untenable assumptions, as many scholars have shown (Ajana 2010; Caplan and Torpey 2001; Lyon 2001; Robertson 2009; van der Ploeg 1999; van der Ploeg 2009). Simply put, document-based verification operates on the premise that the link between an individual and a document is secure. Such schemes of "token-based identification," explains Irma van der Ploeg, base verification on an individual's "possession of a 'thing'" (van der Ploeg 1999: 38). However, the provenance of the document—the history that establishes its credibility to verify identity—is not an unmediated correspondence between, say, the passport and the embodied individual who carries it: it is the authority of the institution that issued it (van der Ploeg 1999: 38). In turn, the document issuer's assurance of verity depends on other documents, documents presented to the certifying authority to establish identity. Indeed, as Jane Caplan suggests, "this giddy spiral of tokens encompasses the relationship between fact and fiction, between the identity document and its bearer" (Caplan 2001: 52).

The TSA's Secure Flight program depends on this token-based system: to enter a sterile area at a U.S. airport, a TSA agent compares the individual before them to the official identity document they proffer. The only link between identity document and the body of the passenger is the photograph which, in the case of U.S. passports, can be up to 10 years old. Indeed, the Secure Flight program relies on an essentially nineteenth-century technology—the visual inspection of a photograph affixed to a document. But the SFP's technically quaint approach



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is this the abbreviation for Secure Flight program? if so, need to spell out here

to passenger screening may be a reflection of its initial purpose: it is not primarily designed to verify the identity of passengers at the airport, but “to screen passengers directly against government watch lists” maintained by the federal Terrorist Screening Center before they arrive there (Transportation Security Administration 2010).

If the current securitization of identity at the U.S. airport is effectively organized around ensuring who passengers *are not*, biometrics holds out the promise that a passenger’s identity can be affirmatively established and so makes the link between identity and identification secure. Biometric technologies involve capturing unique information about a particular individual’s body or behavior—fingerprints, gait signatures, iris patterns, facial structure, voice patterns, DNA, for instance—and digitizing that information, storing it, and retrieving it to compare against the information extracted on the spot from the body of the individual presenting herself for identity verification. As the “‘missing link’” between the immateriality of information flows and networks, and the materiality of individual embodied existence,” van der Ploeg writes, these technologies “informatize the body” by transforming it into “a machine readable identifier” (2009: 86-87; see also Magnet 2011; Puar 2007: 175). In the quest for perfect information, then, policymakers imagine that the body itself will not just provide, but actually *be* the perfect piece of information.

Of the possible epistemological sources of human identity—what one *is* (a body), what one *says* about oneself (a narrative), what one *does* (a performance), and what one *has* in hand (a token)—it is the *is*-ness of the body that reigns supreme in the quest for perfect information (Ajana 2010). Documents may be fraudulent, individuals cannot be trusted to vouch for themselves or to maintain a consistent presentation of self, but the body, it is assumed, cannot be forged and does not lie. Most significantly, while the body might age, succumb to disease and injury, its core elements are thought to be stable over time. What verifies legal identity, or “reidentification” in the lexicon of philosopher Marya Schechtman, is the “sameness of body” between one time and another (1990: 71). At the time of writing, the TSA has not yet installed biometric

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technologies for routine passenger identity verification. But, according to a joint press release by the Department of Homeland Security, which houses the TSA, and the Department of State, “the next generation of international travel documents—e-passports that contain a contactless chip to which biometric and biographic information is written—will further strengthen international border security by ensuring that both the document is authentic and that the person carrying an e-passport is the person to whom the document was issued” (Department of Homeland Security 2006). Plans are afoot to offer biometrics for flight crews and airport personnel, and for frequent travelers as well.

### **GENDER AS BIOMETRIC INFORMATION**

However, there is one piece of biometric data, we suggest, already in use at the airport: gender. In an examination of debates about the criteria for gender reclassification on New York City birth certificates, Currah and Moore have shown how gender operates as a biometric identifier in the eyes of vital statistics officials (2009: 114, 124). While one’s classification as M or F on identity documents is not a *unique* identifier, as most pieces of biometric data are understood to be, the assumption that the classification of M or F is a *permanent* feature of the body underlies the rationale for its use in identity verification. Identity is not simply a matter of *who* one is but also *what* one is: “the question ‘who is this person?’ leaches constantly into the question ‘what kind of person is this?’” (Caplan and Torpey 2001: 3). As an apparently permanent attribute of the body, one’s gender classification is shared with too many others (about half the population normally) to be used to verify *who one is*, but it can help, it is assumed, to determine *who one is not*.

That gender is an essential piece of information to collect is made clear in the TSA’s rationale for including it in the Secure Flight program. When the Department of Homeland Security asked for public comments on the proposed program in 2008, one person or organization suggested that the TSA “eliminate the gender requirement . . . and instead require passengers to submit information regarding their ethnicity, race, or national origin.” TSA officials responded by pointing

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out that “many names are not gender neutral. Additionally, names not derived from the Latin alphabet, when translated into English, do not generally denote gender. Providing information on gender will reduce the number of false positive watch list matches, because the information will distinguish persons who have the same or similar name” (Department of Homeland Security 2008: 64034).

While the individual who submitted the comment certainly might have meant that gender need not be a metric of identity at all—and it is odd and somewhat suspect that this individual or organization saw race or ethnicity as a better piece of data—the TSA apparently did not ever consider leaving a passenger’s gender classification out. As officials made clear in the rationale above, that M or F needed to be included in the identification details was never in doubt: its response focused on *how* that piece of information would best be ascertained—indirectly through associations with names or directly through requiring disclosure.

But the Secure Flight program does not just use the M or F on the identity document to screen passengers against the no-fly lists and to eliminate false positives. If this were all that happens, gender would not be deployed as biometric data, as unchanging information from the body. It would, instead, share the same epistemological status as one’s name and date of birth, the other pieces of lexical information gathered: provisionally useful but ultimately unattachable to an individual body, resting instead on a “giddy spiral” of other identity documents. In fact, TSA agents do use gender as a fixed piece of biometric information about an individual, one that can be checked against the passenger in front of them. That is, the security apparatus does not just require the M or F on the document to be compared with information in government watch lists; at the airport, the TSA agent looks at the M or F on the passenger’s identity document, looks at the passenger, and then decides if the M or F corresponds to the passenger. Again, as biometric information, one’s gender classification cannot be used to verify identity, to allow an agent to say with certainty who one is. But it can and is used to make a decision about who a passenger is not. In the case of

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some transgender people at the airport, sometimes who the passenger *is not* is: herself.

Mark Salter points out that airports “condition and normalize particular identities” (2008: xii). More specifically, in an examination of effects of national security identification policies on transgender people, Toby Beauchamp has shown how surveillance systems are “deeply rooted in the maintenance and enforcement of normatively gendered bodies, behaviors and identities” (2009: 357). At the airport, expectations of passengers’ gender reflect the unquestioned and often unthought common sense of gender as an unchanging biometric characteristic: that there is a perfectly harmonious relationship between the sex classification an individual is assigned at birth based on a visual inspection of the body (what one was), one’s current “biological sex” (what one is), one’s gender identity (what one says one is), one’s gender presentation (what one looks like to others) and the gender classification on the particular identity document one proffers. Indeed, the vast majority of people walk through airport security uninhibited by any confusion over their gender, and those uncontested passages reinforce and reflect the common sense belief that gender is a unitary component of identity.

But for transgender people, gender is not a singular entity. It is better understood as a conglomeration—loosely organized under the ideological rubric of gender—that houses individual gender identity, state classification decisions (as M or F), a body that may or may not have been modified to some degree, and presentation through dress and behavior of the “cultural insignia” of gender. It is not uncommon for transgender people to “live in one gender while their documents read another” (Rachlin 2011). There are a dizzying number of possible ways to upend the expected correspondence between the gender classification on a passenger’s ID document and her embodied gendered self. And genderqueer or third-gender individuals who eschew the M/F gender binary altogether confound the unity of the category even more. The following examples represent just a few possibilities:

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- ▶ A female traveler who had been classified male at birth may have had many gender-confirming interventions, including hormone therapy, electrolysis, and vaginoplasty, and might have an identity document classifying either M or F;
- ▶ A female traveler who had been classified male at birth may present as female, have retained her original genitalia, and carry an identity document classifying her as either M or F;
- ▶ A male traveler who had been classified female at birth may have had masculinizing hormone treatment, wear a full beard, have male pattern baldness, had masculinizing surgery to transform female breasts to male breasts, retained his original female genitalia, and carry an identity document classifying him as M or F;
- ▶ Some individuals may opt to change their appearance in order to pass as the gender that is culturally expected of them, given their birth sex;
- ▶ Finally, to add to the chaos, in each of the hypothetical cases, it's also possible—indeed, even common—that the individual has one identity document with an M and another with an F.

Conflicts between or among the different sources of knowledge about gender—identity documents, the body, an individual's performance—can produce a category crisis. Benjamin Singer calls this the “transgender sublime,” and describes it as an experience in which “the sheer variety of trans bodies and genders exceeds [agents'] cognitive capacity to comprehend them” (2006: 616).

The epistemic uncertainty revealed in these moments of dissonance, however, does not augur the end of the securitization of gender, or even undermine it. As Stuart Hall reminds us, it is an intellectual conceit to imagine that “the world will collapse as a result of a logical contradiction” (1988: 166). That no particular knowledge regime can put an end to debates about which characteristic of gender should be the definitive one does not put state actors out of the business of classifying gender. Decisions backed by the force of law do not have to be internally coherent. Instead, it is transgender travelers who suffer

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the effects of systemic confusions about gender classification. And it is transgender travelers who are forced to contort their gendered selves to appear as conventionally gendered as possible at the airport. In his research on borders and transgender identity management practices, Reese Kelly has documented the tactics that gender nonconforming people use to avoid drawing attention to themselves. In a summary of his findings, he writes,

The very possibility of pat downs and scrutiny of identity documents contributed to many participants engaging in what I refer to as identity normalizing strategies. These normalizing strategies often consisted of the deliberate construction of a normatively gendered presentation of self. . . . A few individuals in my study changed their gendered appearance to coincide with their identity documents that still listed their sex assigned at birth and which often had outdated photos. . . . Almost all of the individuals I interviewed . . . described engaging in bodywork and presentation rituals in order to appear non-threatening in regards to all aspects of their identities (Kelly 2011).

These identity management strategies require adding a metalevel analysis of the social production of gender. It is axiomatic in the theories that inform much thought about gender, at least in the humanities and social sciences, that gender is performed rather than expressed, that gender is an effect rather than a cause, that gender is produced through social relations rather than through willful acts of individuals. But at the airport, successfully negotiating the different and contradictory ways that gender has been securitized requires a performance of a performance.

### **GENDER IN THE AIRPORT SECURITY ASSEMBLAGE**

What complicates the passage of a transgender individual through airport security is that her identity is obvious in the way it is expected

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to be by the TSA. A United Nations human rights special rapporteur pointed out that “counterterrorism measures that involve increased travel document security, such as stricter procedures for issuing, changing and verifying identity documents, risk unduly penalizing transgender persons whose personal appearance and data *are subject to change*” (United Nations 2009: 19). Yet, the transgender experience at the airport is more than just an exception. The biometric use of gender should not be seen as just a policy decision that, however unjustly, limits the freedom of a very small minority of individuals. It also shows how particular notions of gender come to be stabilized through their incorporation into larger systems of organization and control.

In actuality, how gender is defined in any particular context depends not on what one might think gender *is*, but on what it *does* in that context: there is no unitary notion of gender to which an individual simply does or does not conform. It is not only “personal appearance and data” that change, but the very concept of gender. In shifting our analysis this way, we can, following Deleuze, ask a more productive set of questions: “in what situations, where and when does a particular thing happen, how does it happen, and so on? A concept, as we see it, should express an event rather than an essence” (1995: 14). As an event, the concept of gender is bound to the particular context in which it occurs, whether it be the airport, the doctor’s office, or the courtroom. Likewise, there is no coherent, singular state authority policing gender definition, but different authorities: indeed, “the state is just as messy and diffuses a concept as gender” (Currah forthcoming). That different state actors dispersed across the U.S. federal system of government have different requirements for changing gender markers on identity documents illustrates this point. Sometimes genital surgery is required, sometimes not. But instead of fixating on what gender “really” is, how it ought to be defined, we might see these arbitrary and conflicting rules for gender reclassification in another light: not as perplexing contradictions but instead as expressions of different state projects: one centered on recognition, the other on distribution.

The concept of *assemblage*, from Deleuze and Guattari, provides

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one way of understanding how the contingent, chaotic, and epistemologically ungroundable concept of gender can be deployed in security mechanisms as if it were a tangible hard fact. Assemblages can be understood broadly as “functional conglomerations of elements” in which each element gains meaning in its relation to the others in the assemblage (Currier 2003: 203). The security assemblage at the airport is a convergence of many parts, from technologies and security strategies to bodies and social norms; it is, like the airport itself, “a messy system of systems, embedded within numerous networks and social spheres” (Salter 2008: xiii). The airport security assemblage prevents certain individuals and materials from reaching the plane, while it also allows the maximum number of people to pass through unrestricted, so as not to inhibit the “flow of commerce” (U.S. GAO 2010: 10). Gender can be seen as one of many “flows” or “forces” that come into the assemblage: it is not invented in the airport assemblage, but reconfigured by it in specific ways. As Haggerty and Ericson explain, flows “exist prior to any assemblage, and are fixed temporarily and spatially by the assemblage” (2000: 608). In the context of an ever more uncertain and unknowable world of possible risks, gender anomalies are cause for heightened suspicion and scrutiny. Gender, in the security assemblage at the airport, is deployed as a biometric, a piece of data tied directly to the body. This “securitized” variant of gender, operationalized in the assemblage, is more than just a norm from which transgender individuals constitute an exception. As Currier points out, “a self-identical body (or object) cannot be identified prior to, or outside of, the field of encounters that articulate it within any specific assemblage;” instead, through the assemblage, something new or “other” is created (2003: 331). At the airport, the “something other” for gender is what we are calling its securitization.

The securitization of gender is doubly useful in conceptually grasping what happens to gender at the airport. Following Rose’s observations about the “securitization of identity,” we have used “securitization” to describe how gender becomes an object of state (and increasingly private and privatized) surveillance through the two TSA

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programs. In that sense, the “security” in securitization reflects forms of control associated with sovereign power—barriers, bans, prohibitions, punishments, searches by uniformed personnel, interrogations. But identity in general and gender in particular are also securitized in another sense—as a form of risk management, as techniques for “governing the future” (Valverde 2007: 163). Risk management is not only a central mechanism of governmentality, but also of capital. In fact, it may be that the financial analogy is the most apt here. In finance, securitization involves the bundling of disparate pieces of debt into financial instruments. And what is debt? Debts are obligations, promises to repay at some point in the future. Securitization is, as Randy Martin explains, “the future made present” (2007:18). In the security systems assembled by the Transportation Security Administration, the disparate identities/bodies/documents that fall under the rubric of gender are provisionally stabilized into objects that will hold steady over time—a promise of identity as future sameness. The TSA recommends that transgender people, especially transgender people “in transition”, carry letters from their doctors. These letters generally affirm the genuineness of the individual’s attachment to the new gender, and, in doing so, become forms of security. Likewise, the evidence required to change the gender classification on an identity document—typically affidavits from physicians—attest to the permanence of the new gender in the future.

Just as the securitization of debt attempts to turn promises about the future into tangible commodities in the present, the securitization of an individual’s gender tries to render uncertainty about the future more predictable. Foucault pointed out in a 1978 lecture that to manage contingency, “the temporal, the uncertain . . . have to be inserted within a given space” (2007: 20). Security is comprised of spatial arrangements that create a milieu that can manage or lessen the impact of whatever unpredictable events the future holds. While identity as being, as narrative, as process, is a temporal category, the body—in our case the gendered body—is figured as spatial, something that can be known by the presence or the lack of certain configurations of flesh. To pass

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through airport security without issue, an individual's gender is securitized by attempting to turn the body into not such a source of information but a promise about the present and the future. As individuals flow through the systems of surveillance and control in the airport, transgender people—with their incongruous and unexpected histories, documents, and bodies—often find themselves in the uncomfortable interstices between spatial and temporal registers, between stasis and change, between what one is and what one says or does.

## NOTES

1. In this paper we use the term “gender” rather than “sex.” The meanings of both terms are widely contested in the hard and soft sciences, in the humanities, in legal theory, in women’s and gender studies, and increasingly in popular discourse. Ultimately, the only thing we know for sure about what sex means, or what gender means, is what state actors, backed by the force of law, say those words mean. Legal definitions of gender and the various criteria states use to classify individuals as male or female are certainly fraught, but they do matter because gender is mechanism for the unequal distribution of rights and resources. Because the TSA uses “gender” to refer to one’s classification as M or F on identity documents, we have chosen to do so as well, for consistency’s sake.
2. A small caveat: while many of the points we make about how gender becomes securitized may be applicable to other agencies inside the United States, and to contexts outside of it, our research is limited to the two specific programs put in place by the TSA. The U.S. Customs and Border Patrol has already installed biometric identification technology at all border locations but this article examines the identity management processes of only the U.S. Transportation Security Agency. It is our hope that the admittedly narrow focus of this investigation generates insights that a broader approach might miss.
3. We have submitted Freedom of Information Act requests to the Transportation Security Administration asking for any documents that indicate if officials considered how the Secure Flight and Whole


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Body Imaging program would affect transgender and gender nonconforming people. At the time of writing, we had not yet received a substantive response from the TSA.


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[Bill: Chicago apparently only includes the top URL for blogs and omits the author's name, date, and permalink. Vivian and I agree that this seems incomplete, but we'll follow your lead. The original listing is the deleted Katherine Cross entry.]



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