

Perspectives on Trans Icons



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Good evening everyone! My name is Elaine Martin and thank you for joining us tonight! I know you're as excited as I am to see this performance of "I Am My Own Wife". How many of you knew who Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was before you heard of this production? How many of you still don't? Well, I don't want to be a spoiler. So, I'll bury my hints deeply so as not to ruin your experience of the performance.

Before you see this fabulous production, I'd like to speak to you about Charlotte's role as a Trans icon, of which I'm sure she had no idea at the time of her life. She was just doing her thing under *very* difficult and challenging circumstances

Let's do just a little Trans 101 review. So as not to offend anyone, I'll be using Trans as a short hand for Transgender, which is the umbrella term for all gender non-conforming people. This includes crossdressers, drag queens, agender people, gender queer people and all people whose expression and behavior does not conform to the societal expectations for their gender.

Being Transgender in *no* way indicates your sexual preference. Let's just say that your gender identity is who you go to bed "as" and sexual orientation is about who you go to bed *with*. One is in your *head* and *one* is in your pants. The reason for this is that gender and sexual orientation are entirely separate and independent of each other.

Let's also understand what a cis-gender person is. The term cis-gender is to straight as Trans is to Gay. A cis-gender person is someone who is quite happy as a gender *conforming* person. The people I'll be discussing are certainly Trans, but may be gay or straight, asexual, bisexual or any variation of which we can or cannot conceive.

So... I've theorized that there are 3 kinds of Trans icons. I realize I did not ask you about it first, but see what you think.

First, there are those who work for Trans rights. We'll call them
"Trans Champions"



These are people whose visibility is primarily *because* they are Trans. They've worked long and hard to make the lives of Trans people easier by advocating for their rights.

They give visibility to the Trans condition. They provide a role model for new and struggling Trans people. They are recognized primarily by Trans people for the contribution they make to the Trans experience and/or Trans rights. They are socially and politically prominent. They are advocates, authors, legal representatives, and political figures. They are less likely to be recognized by cis-gender people. Some examples are

Mara Keisling,



Mara Keisling, founder, Executive Director
National Center for Transgender Equality
Trans Champion

Marsha P. Johnson,



Marsha P. Johnson, Stonewall Rebellion Leader, Activist
Trans Champion

Sylvia Rivera,



Sylvia Rivera, Stonewall Rebellion Leader, Activist
Trans Champion

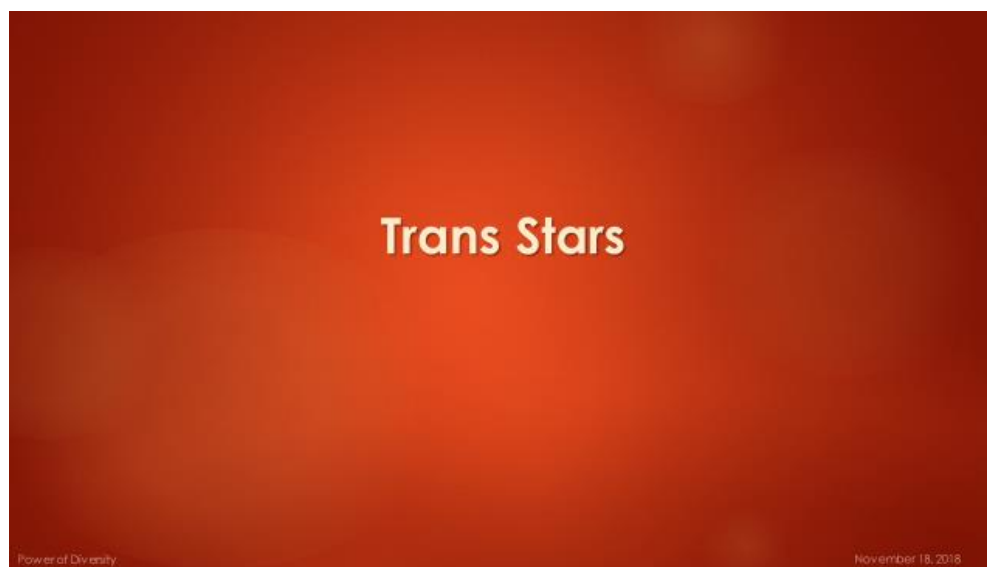
and Janet Mock.



Janet Mock, Author, Activist,
Trans Champion

There are many many of these.

Next come Celebrity icons. We'll call them Trans Stars



Trans Stars are icons whose contribution is derived primarily from visibility only. They have not made any publically obvious contribution to improve the lives of Trans people except that they surprise us and teach us that Trans people come from corners of our society that can be unsuspected. Their visibility alone can give hope to Trans people who might be struggling to come out for fear of lost friends, family members, their employment or housing.

They become a short hand for people to understand what a Trans person is even if they are not an exemplary version of a Trans person. The Trans community might or might not embrace them, but there is no doubt that a Trans Star's presence helps us to be more mainstream. That's not to say that they might not show up

very publically and make a plea for Trans rights on occasion, but this is not how they are primarily known. Yes... You're thinking Caitlyn Jenner,



as well as Chaz Bono,



and Laverne Cox,



Lavern Cox, Actress
Trans Star

But, also Dr. Renee Richards a tennis player from the 70's, who competed as a woman in the 1976 U.S. Open



Dr. Renee Richards, Tennis Player, Ophthalmologist
Trans Star



Dr. Renee Richards, Tennis Player, Ophthalmologist
Trans Star

and Christine Jorgensen from the 50's. How many of you know who she was? Those of you who just put your hands up revealed your age.

Well, she has a very special meaning to me. When I was about 8 years old, I was thumbing through some old Look magazines and I came across a picture of her getting off a plane.



Christine Jorgensen, Pioneer
Trans Star

I remember that this stirred something inside me. It was very exciting to find out I could be a girl and I looked again and again fascinated and dreaming it could be true. At the same time, even as a little person, I was afraid I'd be caught looking at her pictures.

This memory remained clear to me into adulthood, but I could not remember when it happened. Later I discovered that it was a 1952 issue of the magazine.

George Jorgensen was born in 1926 in the Bronx. In the pictures I saw, she was returning from Denmark for one of the first publicized so called" sex change operations". It was a very big deal at the time, especially because it was just after WWII and George Jorgensen had fought bravely in it. Christine was 27 and she looked FABULOUS as she stepped off that plane in a full length fur coat. She said, ""Nature made a mistake which I have had corrected." Unfortunately, at the time, she was thought to be crazy. The NY Daily News ran a big bold headline "EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY".



As a man, she was slight and attractive in a feminine way. She admitted to being gay, but found men repulsive when they propositioned him. She became famous in Hollywood and widely accepted into its royalty. She turned to acting and became a nightclub singer as well, performing, predictably, "I Enjoy Being a Girl." She was fodder for the tabloids and risqué magazines. She died in 1989 at the age of 62 of cancer.

She once said, "We didn't start the sexual revolution but I think we gave it a good kick in the pants!" Today, some consider her to be the Caitlyn Jenner of her time.

And, finally there are Trans icons who have made a contribution, not because they are Trans, but in spite of it. We'll call them Trans Humanists

Trans Humanists

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Their contribution can be recognized by all people, Trans or not. Trans people honor them because they have been successful *as* Trans people. We take pride in their positive contributions, whatever they may be and in whatever field. We Trans people honor these contributions partly because a Trans person made them, but also because that contribution impacted cis-gender people as well. Trans Humanists are known first for their contribution and not necessarily for being Trans. After we learn what they accomplished straight people might say, "and oh yeah, by the way, did you know they're Trans!?" In fact, they may not even be recognized as Trans at all. I actually think this is the state of the Trans experience we hope for. A world where we are regarded as people first and perhaps Trans later. Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was most certainly a Trans Humanist.

One of my favorite contemporary Trans humanists, who is personally known to me, is Martine Rothblatt.



Does anyone here know who she is? Well for those of you who do, let's not give it away until the end.

Martine was born in Chicago in 1954, so she's 64 now. She was raised outside San Diego and is Jewish, as am I. She was educated at UCLA and received a combined Law and MBA degree in 1981 and a PhD in Medical Ethics from Queen Mary University of London. She studied Astronomy, was a consultant to NASA, the FCC, and the Human Genome Project. Martine has been married to Bina, a woman, for over 30 years and they have 4 children together.

She pursued biotech after one of her daughters was diagnosed with a deadly lung disease, which most people died from within two years at that time. This became her inspiration.

She founded United Therapeutics in 1996, located here in the Triangle, which now sells five FDA-approved pills to help people with lung disease. In 2017, she was the highest paid female CEO in America.

Now publicly traded, United Therapeutics is experimenting with pig cloning and genetic modification to create lung Transplants the body doesn't reject. The company's pig 'pharm' in Blacksburg, Virginia, is the world's largest cloner of pigs.

I met her because of her desire to pilot a helicopter to personally deliver the first *cloned* lung transplant organ. And, she is in fact an instrument rated helicopter and fixed wing pilot now.

There is really so much more I could tell you and I invite you to read more about her. But, here's the punch line: Wait for it: She was also the founder of Sirius XM Radio.

For all this accomplishment, you probably would not know she's Trans except that I've just told you so. If there could be a fourth category of Trans icon called Trans Super Icon, she'd be one.

All Champions, Stars, and Humanists, have faced both the internal struggles of Trans people as well as the external struggles of all people. But, further, they face struggles due to the intersection of both. Charlotte was such a person. I in no way intend to be judgmental as to which category of Trans icon is most important. Their contributions are varied just like anyone's. You can't really compare the work of Nobel Prize winners in the physical sciences to those Nobel Prize winners in the social sciences. It's personal. Your evaluation will be based on your personal context. This is true of the contributions made by Trans icons as well.

Some people never gain fame even though it's their sole desire and aspiration. And, some people gain fame even though it was never pursued or anticipated. Charlotte was the latter. She just wanted to be herself and do it to the fullest extent possible.

As Trans women, dressing up in another gender is really kind of boring. Dressing to please our look in the mirror leaves us gratified,

but empty and needing more. So first we do simple things. We clean house. Go to the mailbox. Cook. Read.

Watch TV. Write. Take a drive. But, we're alone and soon we crave the validation that can only come from others.

Public service is a one way to validate ourselves. We get involved and lose our sense of being different. We get regarded as real and fully integrated to the activities at hand. We meet new people who further validate us as women. We hone skills that allow us to better navigate the world in a new gender.

We experiment with influence rather than aggression. And, if the work is meaningful to others, we gain some small recognition for the entire Trans community as genuine people first, rather than just eccentric outliers. A contribution created in our new gender, such as the Grunderzeit Museum, validates our ability to live that way while being recognized for it. We also lose our shame because we are regarded with the same respect as others and because we are distracted from it. And, of course, we gain personal satisfaction.

Many of us who work in Trans advocacy are viewed askance by our community. They sometimes wonder if our work is for altruistic

purposes, or if we work for our own prominence? As Trans people, or as just people, I think it's some of both.

As Trans people, we *are* in fact focused on our visibility as advocates. AND, also, the work we do nearly always requires some personal sacrifice and risk. But we need to be evaluated with a perspective on what we actually do. Do we represent our community in a positive light? Do we "show up"? Are we helpful to our less fortunate brothers and sisters? Do we leave things better than when we began? Do we have a positive legacy? Aren't these the questions we ask of anyone?

To me; Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was another Trans Humanist who faced massive internal and external struggles and delivered a small but very significant contribution to us all in the form of the Grunderzeit Museum. But, also she demonstrated the heroic overcoming of huge obstacles as she was successfully living as her authentic self.

She is often referred to as a Transvestite. In the early part of her life, she probably was. Today, she'd just be Trans, gay, queer, a drag queen, or some unique combination thereof. She would not be a Transvestite because we don't use that term anymore. It's an

archaic term that most Trans people find offensive today. Today we use the term *cross dresser*, which she most certainly was. Without having met her, I can't begin to describe the specific part of the Trans spectrum she inhabited. We can't tell if, for example, she was a *crossdresser*, *Transsexual*, or *bi-gender*. But, truthfully, none of us falls perfectly on any part of the Trans spectrum. Besides, she was in a process of seeking her own definition of self. Her own *personal truth*.

When we speak of Transition, most cis-gender people think of a single point in time that one's gender is changed. But, actually, it's an extended period of time that can be lifelong.

Something that I have in common with Charlotte, is that when I was discovering I was different, there was no internet. I thought I was alone. I had to discover I was not alone in an epiphany, as Charlotte did. There was no public discussion of gender theory. There was some academic recognition of gender variance, but Charlotte and I were not privy to it because it only lived on the fringe of academia.

All Trans people do struggle. With themselves, with their families accepting them, with employment, with their bodies, with the law.

But generally, we do not struggle with Nazis and communism.

Charlotte also knew that Nazis were *not* good people. She knew this because of the way they treated others, in particular Jews, gay people, gypsies, POC and the mentally and physically challenged.

She knew that their humanity was being ignored in order to dispose of them.

Despite our disproportionate loss of life due to suicide and assault, Trans people are survivors. And sometimes the only way to survive is to compromise. Charlotte may have compromised. IF she did, I'd prefer to believe that her instinct was survival not only for herself, but also for the benefit her vulnerable and threatened community as well as the cherished contents of her museum.

Under the Communists, the Stasi secret police had 90,000 full-time employees who were assisted by 170,000 full-time unofficial collaborators. They were everywhere and virtually impossible to avoid. Privacy was difficult to come by and folks were not paranoid because the threat was real. According to Simon Wiesenthal, "The Stasi was much, much worse than the Gestapo, if you consider only the oppression of its own people,"

Many Trans women survive today through compromise, as Charlotte may have. Whether it's hiding from certain segments of our lives, or working in the sex trade.

There are three basic fears faced Trans people.

Three Fears of Trans People

- ▶ Fear of Acceptance
- ▶ Fear of Discovery
- ▶ Fear of Biology

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- 1. Fear of Acceptance: By one's self and others, which we can be certain Charlotte faced because she was different and knew it. Fear of acceptance can lead to isolation and depression.**
- 2. Fear of Discovery: We sometimes live in shame, and hide. The consequences of discovery, in Charlotte's, case meant being jailed or worse by Nazis and Communists**
- 3. And finally, the fear created by Biology. Our body concept, sexuality, and expression of intimacy, which we know little**

about in Charlotte's case, but I think we can be pretty sure she experimented.

She had an outlaw spirit and was an inspiration during a time that defined hard times.



**Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, Pioneer, Survivor, founder The Grunderzeit Museum
Trans Humanist**

I'd like to leave you with this: I don't know what Charlotte von Mahlsdorf has engraved on her tombstone, but perhaps something from Kaci Diane, a poet from Atlanta, would be appropriate. She wrote, "I love the person I've become, because I fought to become her." Thank you very much for listening.—

Now we have time for some Q-&A before we enjoy the performance.