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## IDENTITY CRISIS IN LEE MOKOBE'S *WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE A TRANSGENDER*

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"In each of us two powers preside, one male, one female" says Virginia Woolf in *On Sublime Meditation on Gender*.

The word "transgender" or "trans" is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth. The word "transgender" and our modern definition of it came into use in the late 20th century. The people who would fit under this definition have existed in every culture throughout the recorded history.

The transgender community is incredibly diverse. Some transgenders identify themselves as male or female, and some identify as genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, or somewhere else on or outside of the spectrum of what we understand gender to be. In many ways, transgender people are just like cisgender (non-transgender) people, but because of the social stigma surrounding the transgender identity, the community faces a unique set of challenges.

"Our bodies become lessons about sin/way before we learn how to love them" says Lee Mokobe in TedTalk.

Lee Mokobe, a 19-year-old South African slam poet and the youngest TED2015 Fellow, was invited to give a talk as part of the TEDWomen Conference in Monterey, California. During the event, the 19-year old poet and activist, whose work deals with social injustice and gender identity issues, delivered a stirring autobiographical poem. In his own poetry, Mokobe tackles tough social justice and LGBTQ issues. He is also the co-founder of Vocal Revolutionaries, a volunteer run organization that empowers youth in South Africa to find their voice through poetry and art, offering free workshops, motivational talks, seasonal slams, national or local performances and mentoring. He has performed across three continents and was the youngest and first African coach at the Brave New Voice Festival, which he won in 2015.

Lee Mokobe's mother said, "You can grow up to anything you want" (TedTalk). These words were the driving force to his success leading to the construction of two renowned works namely *What it feels like to be a Transgender*, a powerful poem that describes his personal emotions and feelings of being a transgender in this gendered-centered culture; and, having moved to the US, he constructed a poem titled *The Not Yet Burning Country* which has comparative elements to America's election of Donald Trump and how South Africa has dealt with xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia. The poem highlights how victims are shamed and their experiences belittled. The poem also addresses the hypocrisy of those who have the power to make changes for the better.

"As a performing artist, it is my duty and passion to be able to document life experiences and speak up against injustices. As a slam poet, who explores social injustice and gender identity issues, I am dedicated to shedding light and inspiring change through my art forms" says Lee Mokobe.

The poem, "What it feels like to be a Transgender", gives a new insight about the feelness of a transgender. The poet's poetic exploration on transgender identity reflects on his personal experiences as a

transgender person growing up in South Africa, and the responses he has received from other people about his identity. He mentions the internal conflict that came as a result of trying to interpret his identity through the way in which society understands sex and gender.

"I was the mystery of an anatomy,  
a question asked but not answered,  
tightroping between awkward boy and apologetic girl,  
and when I turned 12, the boy phase wasn't deemed cute anymore." (Mokobe22-25)

As a slam poet, LGBTQ activist and TED Fellow, Mokobe understands that his medium has the potential to penetrate minds. The narrative style of the slam poet is very strong yet simple and presents without trying to prove any specific argument. With energetic vibrations that dance on eardrums and implant themselves into hearts of those listening to or reading his work, as a receiver of his words, one cannot ignore the power of his emotional deliveries.

In the HRC Foundation's 2012 survey of LGBTQ youth, about 10 percent of respondents identified themselves either as "transgender" or as "other gender," and wrote in identities like "genderqueer," "gender-fluid" or "androgynous." This suggests that a larger portion of this generation's youth are identifying somewhere on the broad transgender spectrum..

While the visibility of transgender people is increasing in popular culture and daily life, we still face severe discrimination, stigma and systemic inequality. Some of the specific issues facing the transgender community are lack of legal protection, poverty, harassment and stigma, anti-transgender violence, barriers to healthcare and identity documents.

While advocates continue working to give a remedy for these disparities, change cannot come too soon for transgender people. Human Rights Campaign is committed to continuing to support and advocate for the transgender community, so that the transgenders will have an equal chance to succeed and thrive.

Lee Mokobe's poem, *What it feels like to be a Transgender* is in align with the Queer Theory. Queer theory's origin is hard to clearly define, since it came from multiple critical and cultural contexts, including feminism, post-structuralist theory, radical movements of people of colour, the gay and lesbian movements, AIDS activism, many sexual subcultural practices such as sadomasochism, and postcolonialism.

The term "queer theory" itself came from Teresa de Lauretis' 1991 work in the Feminist Cultural Studies Journal *Differences* titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*. She explains the term to signify that there are at least three interrelated projects at play within this theory: refusing heterosexuality as the benchmark for sexual formations, a challenge to the belief that lesbian and gay studies is one single entity, and a strong focus on the multiple ways that race shapes sexual bias. De Lauretis proposes that queer theory could represent all of these critiques together and make it possible to rethink everything about sexuality.

One of the key concepts of Queer Theory is "Heteronormativity". Heteronormativity is a form of power and control that applies pressure to both straight and gay individuals, through institutional arrangements and accepted social norms. Some of the core theorists in the development of queer theory include Michael Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler.

In many places, we can see them as arrogant, dominating and non-cooperating characters. There are forums and associations for them and within them to overcome all their issues. The Governments all over the world observe the issues of Transgenders and make facilities for their better living style. With all the motivated steps by the government and well-wishers and also their own break-through characters we can find many of them in different higher positions in almost all the fields. This shows in near future transgenders will stand-out with outstanding performances and with better living standards. Such an inspiring personality is Lee Mokobe. Rather than being celebrated for who Lee was, Lee was mourned for what others believed Lee would or would not be.

#### Works Cited

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