

FAQ: JABU PEREIRA

A CONVERSATION WITH THE SELF

Jabulani Chen Pereira

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Dear Friends, Family and Chosen Family

Over the past months and in some cases years I have engaged with some of you regarding my transition, all my fears, my concerns related to my feminism and conflicted, and never wanting to be embodied in any particular binary of being male or female, I still hold true to this.

I thought I should put out what's foremost in my mind and in some way, do what I know best, that is to document stories and to join my story along with many, in what Ann Cvetkovich calls the Archive of Feelings. In my recent talk at the Quorum platform, I spoke of the trauma of the absence of histories that link our pasts and our present.

I hope that my construction of a FAQ narrative is more a constructed conversation with myself but also the many questions I have been asked over the past months and years. I only hope FAQ is not construed as a factual listing but rather a probing set of questions and answers I am engaging in.

I am also very aware that I have friends who walked this journey with me, for a long time and are as ahead as I am, and there are others who are only engaging with my transition in this present moment, either way, I ask you to be patient with me and I will similarly be patient with you as you become part of my gender identity and gender expression. I am aware that there are some who clearly won't accept transgender persons, I am sorry that you will exit my life at this stage, feel free to engage and to express your feelings in this safe space.

So here are some of the FAQs

Did you always know you were transgender?

No, I did not, in fact when I came at the age of 23 it was 1994 on the eve of democracy and I did not know that the word transgender existed, normally trans was always associated to the privilege of white men able to change their gender identity with expensive trips to Thailand, most black encounters I had were with drag queens, transvestites, but never had I imagined that female born persons would be able to claim their identity as masculine, or being more comfortable with both male and female expressions. I was politically raised to believe that masculine was never, patriarchal and violent, something to fear. I was happy to embrace my life as a lesbian, a black feminist and now evolve into breaking my silent desire to transition, always evolving, never static.

So then when did the light bulb go on?

I had realized overtime that the physical discomfort with my body was the key issue related to depression and to my dislike towards how I embody and feel about being stereotypically framed as female. Body issues was part of birth entry, classified as coloured, given a Welsh English name, and reduced to a youth role of inferiority and struggle. Never accepting. At the age of 23 I had undergone a breast reduction, there was no medical reason for me to do and I was not in any queer community, I just did not want breasts and I wanted them as small as possible. I had just many discomforts with my body and I continue to face those, but when I look back over my life the one thing that was so silenced was the ability to express my desire to have no breasts, to wear all the hottest men's clothing, and to be bolder and comfortable in my gender expression.

So what does transgender mean to you? You have been so gender non-conforming, and that's what makes you Jabu? So why choose to be transgender?

I had to confront my own internalized fears of the possibility of transition and my fears of rejection, loneliness and isolation. Coming out as lesbian and living as a



lesbian feminist for the past 20 years, meant that I always confronted these fears, in particular with my family and working in mainstream human rights environments.

Medical transition or aligning my body to my gender expression is a complex issue for me. You see, when I was 28 years old my Dr has informed me that my body was already in a state of peri-menopause, it has stopped producing estrogen, I had ovarian failure and basically I was in a body that was already supposed to in its mid-50s. 28? Come on I just came out, sex was great and now I had to learn about being in a body that is 30 years ahead of its time. I had to be on hormones to align my body and that so much fear emerged about the risks of HRT, such as cancer and then not taking it was about the risk of osteoporosis. Life has a shit way of hitting you hard. If Apartheid is going to taking away your youth, then peri-menopause of going to take away the joy of vaginal moisture, orgasms and more so, in a democracy, WTF!! And sharing this information was loaded with shame this and shame that – you can't have kids? So you are aging early? Shame man, that's hard hey? Hot flushes? Vaginal dryness – that was the worst of all ☹ any female-bodied sign of desire, lust and not making your lover feel like they just not working hard enough! ☹ shame of race, sexual expression and body identity confronted me more than a decade ago.

The past years I discovered lubricant, gloves and so much more...YES making sex hot! was totally possible and no need to pathologise it. So pathologising my body and declaring it part dead had to change!

The past 6 years have allowed me the space to navigate my identity as a feminist, exploring what it means to be gender non conforming and to step beyond my foundational politics as lesbian feminist, or a bread winner for my family, and to take a step back from 38 years of SA racist trauma, I opted to take a Ford Foundation fellowship and to live in another country and city. Here I met the most amazing people, who are life long friends, many who supported me through the most fragile

stages of undoing my own self oppression, unknowingly assisting me in confronting myself and to focus on the emergencies and crisis before you. NYU and NYC was to become base, yeah the city of anxiety and pushing yourself beyond your limits, great choice for some with PTSD and who had never been to the US before ☺

When I decided to become a full time student in 2009, at NYU, I essentially decided to become undone. Many of you who knew me during this time, witnessed the effects of my PTSD, the fear that giving up a well paid job and to become a student living on 1800\$ per month in one of the most expensive cities in the world, essentially spun me into a state of peeling off the layers and learning that survival mode does not translate to my childhood experience of being poor, displaced, and vulnerable. NO! I was in NYC doing a masters degree, the first in the history of my family and generation and I was doing this for me. It's a choice, NOT a forced context of poverty and trauma and I can do it!

I did it! With the support of so many friends, too many to name but I must acknowledge Jian Neo Chen, Ignacio Rivera, Frances White, Ellen Eisenman, Jovan White, Nadia Dropkin, Celiany Rivera, Irmay Reyes, Parker T Hurley, Tiffany Sekato, Imani Henry, Jane Saks, Mary Hames, Desiress Lewis, Monique Salomon, Heidi van Rooyen, Gabi Ngcobo, Jaime Grant, Jack Harrison-Quintana, Mbwende Anderson, Leslie Ann Murray, Dineo Bopape, Zethu Matebeni my family Karen Mohamed, my son-nephew Shaun Howe, my nieces and nephews, who stood by me and



encouraged me to start this journey of the SELF. I left NYU with a master's degree in hand and a new name on my degree, Jabulani Chen Pereira. My therapist and psychiatrist had begun an amazing process with me, and I knew I was ready to return to SA.

Gender fluidity or being gender non conforming is what embodies my identity as transgender. Many say that you going to be a man now?

Well no, I am going to be transgender, and I don't know the full understanding of this terminology but I believe I will be must more comfortable in my skin and I can never accept a gender world of male and female roles, that is not me and it can never be me. I have to destabilize patriarchy in all its form and end male dominance as much as I can, but too identify as transgender is to locate my politics and to locate the comfort of my struggles to end all forms of stereotyping including the dismantling of racism, sexism and classism.

So are you going to have the FULL operation?

I find this question the most intriguing, especially as I have never been comfortable in my skin, the scars from my breast reduction hindered my public display of my body, only recently I have become more comfortable. I have always regarded myself as unattractive and fat and both are negative words I have heard from childhood. The operation down there questions, scare the hell out of me and feels like my body is being pathologised and medicalised. And that transgender means operations and it does not. If I do have any surgeries I will let you know and I will set up a pay pal account and call on your support to have my chest surgery in November 2015.

I remember coming out as a lesbian and many people spoke about your choice to love someone of the same sex. Or stupid questions about how do you do it with another woman etc,. But coming out as a trans person, I have not received one question about sexual desires, loving someone rather, the focus has been on my genitals and physical changes, this is hurtful and frightening.. If my body changes, please love it like you have always loved me. Love the person you know and continue to be affirming about me, my work, my generosity and my humanity, that's all that I can be.

So, what pronoun should we use, SHE, HE, They or others?

I really don't mind, as long as it's affirming and NOT the OH MY I JUST NEED TO KEEP REMINDING MYSELF. It's offensive when people do that. I really prefer they, them. And not SHE or HE. This may evolve too.

What was your previous name ?

NOB
None of your business.
Jabulani Chen Pereira is who I am, I love this name (thanks Dineo and Jian for giving me these names)

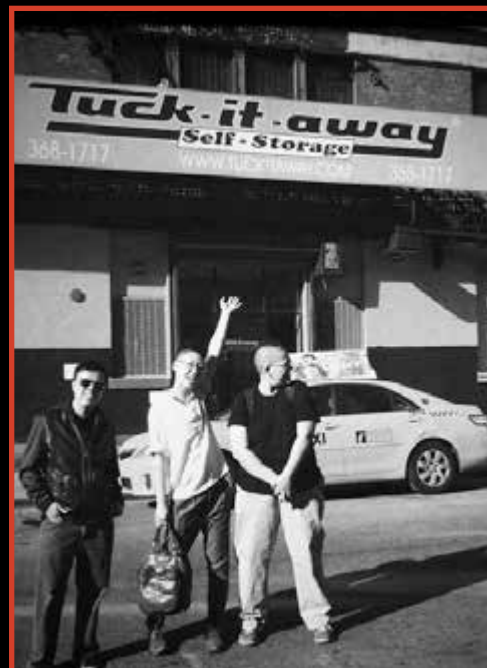
Are you going to having kids and what will you tell them?

I have loving kids in my life, a grandson, nieces and nephews and extended families who have adopted and are adopting my family tree is full.

How will being trans impact on the work and vision of Irantl-org?

It will only strengthen our work in advancing the rights of lesbians, gender non conforming persons, trans men and trans women I am ecstatic that we are one of the few organizations in the world to make the linkages and in bringing together our collective feminism, our collective traumatized bodies and our collective black voices, there is no separation in our struggles now we are shaping a movement in how it should be and not being repetitive of an old apartheid style of separatist politics that is essentially negative on movement building. We are want to free of poverty, to be safe, to have a job, shelter, access to education and the right to human dignity, that's our God given right.

To Mauro Cabral, Leigh Ann van der merwe, Tebogo Nkoana, Nthabiseng Mokoena, Sbu Kheswa, Justus Eisfeld, Skipper Mohape, Ignacio Rivera, Jian Chen, Parker T. Hurley, Imani Henry, Yoli Matu, Joshua Sehoole, Neo Musangi, Whitney Booyen, Ricky Nathanson, Paddy Star Edmund, Beyonce, Guillit Amakobe, Kristian, Chan,



Kim, Victor Mukasa, Leeroy, Nikki Mawanda, Munir, Chloe Schwenke, Natasha Jimenez, Belissa, Andres, Khartini and so many more wonderful trans* activists, thank you for being such amazing leaders and a source of strength and inspiration in my ability to come out. One day we will all be in an archive of feelings. I love and respect you all so much.

So many to say thank you too,

- Mostly my family, who have survived displacement and so many struggles and for just being who you are. My chosen family, I rely on you always and you are always there for me.
- My coach Ellen Sprenger, who walked this journey of moulding my leadership, and keeping me true to being Jabu in all ways possible.
- To my team at Iranti-org, I love your commitment and your passion to see that another world is possible.
- My social media friends, who keep me motivated and committed to the struggle for justice and freedom, let's continue the struggle.
- Donors who support Iranti-org, thank you, for believing in our vision and for allowing us to grow in our own skin and as a movement, you do amazing work.

Common words you may hear but not fully understand:

I took some of this from the GLAAD Site:

Gender Identity

One's internal, deeply held sense of one's gender. For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into one of those two choices. Unlike gender expression (see below) gender identity is not visible to others.

Gender Expression

External manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression align with their gender identity, rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.

Sexual Orientation

Describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. For example, a person who transitions from male to female and is attracted solely to men would identify as a straight woman.

Transgender-Specific Terminology

Transgender (adj.)

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms – including transgender. Some of those terms are defined below. Use the descriptive term preferred by the individual. Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by their doctors to change their bodies. Some undergo surgery as well. But not all transgender people can or will take those steps, and a transgender identity is not dependent upon medical procedures.

Trans

Used as shorthand to mean transgender or transsexual - or sometimes to be inclusive of a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella. Because its meaning is not precise or widely understood, be careful when using it with audiences who may not understand what it means. Avoid unless used in a direct quote or in cases where you can clearly explain the term's meaning in the context of your story.



Transgender man

People who were assigned female at birth but identify and live as a man may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten it to trans man. (Note: trans man, not “transman.”) Some may also use FTM, an abbreviation for female-to-male. Some may prefer to simply be called men, without any modifier. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

Transition

Altering one’s birth sex is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transition includes some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one’s family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person. Avoid the phrase “sex change.”

Cisgender

A term used by some to describe people who are not transgender. “Cis-” is a Latin prefix meaning “on the same side as,” and is therefore an antonym of “trans-.” A more widely understood way to describe people who are not transgender is simply to say non-transgender people.

Gender Non-Conforming

A term used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Please note that not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender; nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming. Many people have gender expressions that are not entirely conventional – that fact alone does not make them transgender. Many transgender men and women have gender expressions that are conventionally masculine or feminine. Simply being transgender does not make someone gender non-conforming. The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual and should only be used if someone self-identifies as gender non-conforming.

Transgender Names, Pronoun Usage & Descriptions

- Always use a transgender person’s chosen name.
- Many transgender people are able to obtain a legal name change from a court. However, some transgender people cannot afford a legal name change or are not yet old enough to change their name legally. They should be afforded the same respect for their chosen name as anyone else who lives by a name other than their birth name (e.g., celebrities).
- Whenever possible, ask transgender people which pronoun they would like you to use.
- A person who identifies as a certain gender, whether or not that person has taken hormones or had some form of surgery, should be referred to using the pronouns appropriate for that gender.
- If it is not possible to ask a transgender person which pronoun is preferred, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person’s appearance and gender expression.
- For example, if a person wears a dress and uses the name Susan, feminine pronouns are usually appropriate.

