REVIEW ESSAY

Reading Transgender, Rethinking Women's Studies

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Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue by Leslie Feinberg. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, 147pp., $20.00 hardcover, $13.00 paper.

Female Masculinity by Judith Halberstam, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 329pp., $49.95 hardcover, $17.95 paper.

Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality by Jay Prosser. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, 270pp., $47.50 hardcover, $17.00 paper.

Representing the best popular and scholarly contributions to transgender/sex studies, and with their mutual concern with female-to-male sex and gender crossing (among other topics), these three books mark an important shift in scholarship on gender and sexuality. Trans studies has reached a level of autonomy and sophistication that firmly establishes it as a field with its own theoretical and political questions. Of course, connections to feminist and queer theory are still very apparent in these texts, and all three authors are committed—to varying degrees—to reading trans identities against the backdrop of male dominance and heteronormativity. It's no longer enough, however, for feminist readers to dismiss the projects of trans theorists and activists as epiphenomenal to feminist discourses or even queer theory, or to view trans studies as an optional extra in discussions of sex and gender. These books represent the best arguments against this position, and thus offer a new challenge to the inclusivity, scope, and terms of "women's studies."

"Transsexual" and "transgender" are essentially contested terms within and outside trans communities, and part of what is at stake in these texts is the relation between established sex, gender, and sexuality labels on the one hand, and these emergent categories on the other. "Trans-" terms capture various kinds of sex and gender crossing, and various levels of permanence to these transitions: from medical technologies that transform sexed bodies, to cross-dressing, to passing, to a certain kind of "life-plot," to being legible as one's birth sex but with a "contradictory" gender inflection. For some, the adjective "transsexed" captures the specific project of changing one's sexed body through surgery and hormones, while for others it more broadly describes a distinctive form of narrative. "Transgendered" might describe any project of gender crossing or blend-

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ing that eschews medicalized interventions, or the term might be used as a catch-all that includes anyone who disturbs established understandings of gender dichotomy or its mapping to sexual dimorphism. The authors of these books epitomize the complexity of trans identities: Judith Halberstam identifies as a masculine woman, Jay Prosser as an FTM (female to male) transsexual, and Leslie Feinberg as a trans person who sometimes uses the shorthand "masculine female" but whose life and work are actually not assimilable to any extant category. These authors all seek to write their own experience as part of their intellectual projects. They all build novel perspectives on what is erased, omitted, or glossed over in existing scholarship and political activism, and all try to initiate new theoretical paradigms and recast political movement. As I hope to show here, there are also tensions within and among these three texts, marking out a conceptual terrain where trans studies is established as a diverse field of inquiry within which protagonists disagree about how various identities should be understood and what political projects they imply.

Leslie Feinberg: *Trans Liberation*

Feinberg's *Trans Liberation* is the popular book of the three. Clearly oriented toward a general audience, it is short, pithy, and represents diverse trans voices in a pastiche of speeches and commentaries by Feinberg and friends. The book's project is to present trans liberation as a political movement "capable of fighting for justice" (5). This movement, in Feinberg's account, includes "masculine females and feminine males, cross-dressers, transsexual men and women, intersexuals born on the anatomical sweep between female and male, gender-blenders, many other sex and gender-variant people, and our significant others" (5). Indeed, in the short "portraits" by other contributors, an impressively wide range of queer identities and stories inflected by class, race, and age are represented: from a male transvestite who became a full-time transgendered woman talking with her wife about their relationship, to a drag queen recalling New York street life and Stonewall, to a gay transman on the significance of his Native heritage, to an intersexed activist discussing the emergence of the intersex movement.

This book has many strengths, including its insistence that sex, gender, and sexual identities be understood narratively and in terms of relationship with others. Feinberg relentlessly connects different oppressions, not shying away from acknowledging a debt to feminism and lesbian and gay liberation in particular, but also resisting the reduction of trans history to these other struggles. It is refreshing to see the variety of radical politics Feinberg supports. Too much popular writing on gender and sexuality is sustained and made palatable by very thin, liberal accounts of freedom, justice, and equality, and by an emphasis on the hardships endured by

relatively privileged and established social groups. It's remarkable that Feinberg is able to rouse support in hir written work and on hir speaking tours not only for "trans liberation," but also for radical class analysis, and connections to anti-racism, anti-Semitism, and feminism.[1] This kind of multi-faceted political analysis too often appears only in abstruse academic form, and goes against the grain of dominant political idioms, especially in the United States. Feinberg's rhetoric is therefore all the more impressive for its ability to capture the interconnection of oppressions and argue convincingly that we all have a stake in undermining them. Sections of the book would work well for undergraduate teaching in feminism or queer theory, especially at the introductory level where engaging and accessible radical texts are hard to find, although as a focal point for a course I would find it rather too theoretically insubstantial and polemical.

Despite this book's many virtues, there are interesting dissonances between Feinberg's analysis of trans oppression, and hir reliance on political discourse that doesn't obviously work for this purpose. The language of choice, for example, appears throughout the book in terms of slogans such as, "every person should have the right to choose between pink or blue tinted gender categories, as well as all the other hues of the palette;" "These ideas of what a 'real' woman or man should be straightjacket the freedom of individual self-expression" (4). But what is the self that lies beneath the "socialization" of gender, and that is supposed to do the choosing here? Are all "choices" really normatively equal? While the point that compulsory gender deforms us all is well taken, Feinberg is too quick to jettison very diverse and supple constructionist accounts by reducing them to an implausible "social determinism": "I do not hold the view that gender is simply a social construct—one of two languages that we learn by rote from early age. To me, gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught" (10). This disavowal leads hir to drift toward a kind of gender voluntarism that contradicts some of hir other arguments, and has alarming political implications.

For example, the notions of choice and agency Feinberg deploys cause hir to move from an otherwise materially inflected and feminist account of gender to a curiously aesthetic and depoliticized version. The notion of gender freedom ze espouses is important in speaking against both the crushing weight of the dominant culture's gender discipline, and some of feminism's more doctrinaire moments: "There are no rights or wrongs in the ways people express their own gender style. No one's lipstick or flattop is hurting us. . . . Each person has the right to express their gender in any way that feels most comfortable" (53). As ze seems to recognize elsewhere, however, the privilege of white bourgeois male masculinity is implicated in the cultural visibility of minority male masculinities, cultural disdain for femininity, and cultural intolerance and disgust directed

against any gender "deviance." These social structures inform and support normative heterosexuality and white bourgeois patriarchy. Gender expression is thus not only an aesthetic choice about cosmetics or hairstyle, skirts, and suits. It's also implicated in politically fraught behaviors, economic marginalization and exploitation, and political consciousness. So even if the aesthetic choices of individuals aren't up for moral grabs (as I agree they shouldn't be), "gender expression" must surely (on Feinberg's own account) occupy a normative terrain. For example, many feminists have argued that misogynist violence is constitutive of certain kinds of masculinity, but it's hardly a form of gender expression that Feinberg can condone. Once when I heard Feinberg speak, I asked hir, with this problem in mind, "What's good about masculinity?" Ze seemed to miss the political import of the question, referring in hir answer instead to the diversity of masculinities across and within time and place, and again alluding to the freedom of individuals to express their gender without fear of reprisal.

This refusal to pass judgment on others' choices contributes to the appeal of Feinberg's rhetoric throughout hir work. But it also sometimes evades hard political questions about who is damaged and privileged by configurations of gender that themselves need to be transformed, sometimes from within the subject's own political consciousness. In other words, Feinberg's approach here elides a crucial aspect of progressive gender politics: the demand that we change ourselves. No doubt ze would resist such a demand on the reasonable grounds that trans people have too often been forced to conform to damaging gender norms, or been oppressively criticized for having the "wrong" sort of consciousness. But this response doesn't allow for important political distinctions between progressive transformations of consciousness initiated from within marginalized communities, and disciplining moves that attempt only to reinforce established divisions.

Judith Halberstam: *Female Masculinity*

A possible solution to this problem can be found in Judith Halberstam's book *Female Masculinity*. This is a lively read and a wonderful academic contribution, offering the first comprehensive and theoretically developed account of the forms masculinity takes when performed or adopted by female-bodied people. Halberstam rejects the popular belief (implicit, as she persuasively argues, in a great deal of contemporary scholarship) that masculinity can be reduced to the male body and its effects. Instead, an investigation of the history and practices of female masculinities can reveal otherwise invisible ways in which male masculinities are constructed. If, as she maintains, "masculinity . . . becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body"(2) then minority and female masculinities are crucial sites for the exposure of the

performativity of masculinity, and for the feminist and queer political projects that incorporate this recognition. Throughout Halberstam details the connections between lesbianism and female masculinity, as well as the complex dynamics of race and class that render some masculinities more visibly performative than others.

Halberstam uses a method she calls "perverse presentism" to outline and analyze case studies of female masculinity from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This method "avoids the trap of simply projecting contemporary understandings back in time . . . [while applying] insights from the present to conundrums of the past" (52–3). Uncertainty about the contemporary connection between females—especially lesbians—and masculinity, she argues, creates a concomitant uncertainty about the history of this connection. Resisting a method that conflates lesbianism and female masculinity, Halberstam aims not to deny the mutual implication of these terms in many contemporary contexts, but rather to hold open a conceptual space that will be able to account for the historical diversity of female masculinities. She pulls together primary sources and their contemporary interpreters (including a discussion of John Radclyffe Hall) to argue that the subject-positions of the tribade, the female husband, the invert, and the passing woman cannot be adequately understood through the lens of contemporary lesbian theory.

In a later chapter she again argues against dominant lesbian/queer readings of the "stone butch," challenging the "melancholic formulation of stone butch desire" as well as "the way in which we demand accountability from some sexual roles but not from others" (112). Resisting the claim that the stone butch is correctly read as "frigid, dysphoric, misogynist, repressed, or simply pretranssexual" (124), Halberstam offers instead an account of stone butchness as a problematic but nonetheless fully legible and satisfying form of female masculinity. I wanted to be convinced by this argument, but Halberstam is reading so much against the grain of the (auto)biographical, ethnographic, and theoretical literatures she examines that her method risks becoming more literally "perverse."

Halberstam thus tries to expand sexual discourse to account for "the myriad practices that fall beyond the purview of homo- and heteronormativity" (139). As an extension of this project, she also examines the conflicts between lesbian butches and female-to-male transsexuals. She returns to an earlier essay—"F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity"—and its FTM critics (who include Jay Prosser) to argue against the privileging of transsexuality in the border wars between butches and FTMs. She aims to "focus on certain categories of butchness without presuming that they represent early stages of transsexual identity within some progressive model of sexual trans-identity and without losing their specificity as masculine identifications within a female body" (152); "it is time to complicate on the one hand the transsexual models that assign gender

deviance only to transsexual bodies and gender normativity to all other bodies, and on the other hand the hetero-normative models that see transsexuality as the solution to gender deviance and homosexuality as a pathological problem" (153–4). This is a fascinating chapter where the debates internal to trans studies are made most apparent: Halberstam lines up against other trans theorists, ending with a compelling critique of the politics of space (including colonialism) apparent in some transsexual accounts.

The book winds down with two chapters addressing filmic representations of butch women and drag king performance, respectively. Both are clever and playful overviews of neglected cultural forms: in the former case Halberstam offers a survey and rough typology of butches in post-war movies (that would work well for teaching purposes in a film class). In the latter case she examines the aesthetics and politics of what she calls "kinging": drag humor associated with masculinity (238). In an insightful contrast with drag queen camp, Halberstam argues that dominant forms of masculinity are constructed through (and invested in) their own invisibility, such that drag kings face enormous challenges in making a performance out of nonperformativity. This chapter has wonderful photos and is enormously entertaining as Halberstam's pleasure in the club culture that has spawned drag king shows shines through. In a brief conclusion, Halberstam uses the image of the raging bull (dyke) and boxing to consolidate her claim that masculinity has both a history and a future in its expression by women.

What's most valuable about this book is its novelty. There exists no other book-length treatment of female masculinity, and Halberstam has definitely set the terms of debate on this topic. The book's originality also contributes to the loose and speculative quality of many of the theoretical arguments. Halberstam is still finding her way on this theoretical terrain, and this book should be read as an initial contribution to a conversation that will undoubtedly move on, rather than as the final word on this subject. It's nonetheless a smart, well-researched, and ambitious book that would be an excellent teaching text in upper-level courses on gender and sexuality, especially in cultural studies or Women's Studies. It's long, and covers a lot of ground, so if taught as a whole would need to be the centerpiece of the course, but with a little background information on the project, students could also read individual chapters.

Jay Prosser: *Second Skins*

Finally, Jay Prosser's *Second Skins* is the most theoretically dense of the three books, and is most obviously directed at an academic audience already immersed in the debates in which he engages. The two themes of the book are embodiment and narrative, which Prosser convincingly

argues are central, under-explored modes of transition in transsexuality. I read this book first as an attempt to develop a politically sophisticated account of the dialectic relation between transsexual experience, and the contradictory constructions of transsexed subjects by medical, literary, and academic discourses. Second, it attempts—with mixed success—to forge an intermediate path between a strain of poststructuralism that emphasizes language at the expense of the body, and an approach to materiality that neglects the body's semiotic construction. The book includes a weighty chapter on Judith Butler's treatment of transgender, which argues that "queer studies has made the transgendered subject, the subject who crosses gender boundaries, a key queer trope" (5). Prosser criticizes a syllogism implicit in a number of queer theorists' work: transgender equates to gender performativity, which equates to "queer," and in turn, to "subversive," with the implicit counterpart: "nontransgender = gender constativity = straight = naturalizing" (33). These theoretical moves, Prosser argues, erase the nonperformativity of some transsexual trajectories. Transsexual subjectivity is too often deformed within the category "queer" by the latter's "poststructuralist problems with literality and referentiality" (58).

In an absorbing chapter on transsexual embodiment, Prosser takes up the important question "What does transsexuality, that fact that subjects do seek radically to change their sex, convey about sex, identity, and the flesh?" (63). Taking the concept of "skin ego" from psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, Prosser analyzes the connection between self and soma, reading sex reassignment surgeries as the search for "a feeling of a coherent and integral body of one's own" (80). Prosser's theoretical insights into the "wrong body" tropes that dominate popular discourse about transsexuality are very welcome, and this is an important intervention into an extremely difficult set of questions in philosophy of the body. But there is something lacking here. The contention that "transsexuals continue to deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality feels like" (69) is unsatisfying. Prosser's claims here need to be further contextualized: many individuals experience related embodied dissonances (anorectics, for example), and we need a phenomenology of transsexual consciousness that does more than detail the significance of bodily transformation for psychic wholeness, and which more firmly situates that consciousness in historical and political context. Thus, while Prosser might resist causal accounts, the question "why these experiences?" lurks in the background of many of these arguments.

The best chapter in the book asks "what kind of autobiographical narrative is the transsexual?" (103). Cataloging the demands of clinicians and the conventions of the genre of autobiography, Prosser argues for an understanding of writing the transsexual life that places the trans subject

as author of a nonetheless engineered narrative. Again, there is a tension here between Prosser's understandable desire to stress the authorial agency of transsexual subjects (as evidenced, for example, by his rejection of Bernice Hausman's argument that technology makes transsexuality possible, and his concomitant emphasis on the historical continuity of autobiographical tropes) and his meticulous elaboration of the over-determination of transsexual narrative. Had Prosser made this tension explicit, he might have addressed it more adequately. Like Feinberg, by insisting on trans agency and self-determination, Prosser risks an implicit reliance on a pre-social self that is at odds with his other theoretical insights.

In the same vein as Halberstam, Prosser reads *The Well of Loneliness* and *Stone Butch Blues* not merely as archetypal lesbian novels, but as texts with a commonly derogated trans subtext. In John Radclyffe Hall's case, the historical shift from sexological to psychoanalytic discourse, argues Prosser, impels the "discursive loss" of the invert in favor of the homosexual. By recuperating *The Well* as a transsexual novel he argues again for the significance of inverts' self-understandings in generating the medical narrative of transsexuality, and defends the historical continuity of transsexual identity. By examining the politics of home in the context of *Stone Butch Blues*, he relatedly examines the "emergence of transgender on the fault lines and tensions between transsexual and queer" (176). Controversially, Prosser reads Feinberg's life and work as evidence of "how uninhabitable is sexed dislocation," arguing: "that transgender as much as transsexual personal accounts continue to center on sexed crossings is, in my mind, a sure sign of the ongoing centrality of sexual difference in our world: a marker of the limits of its reconfigurability, and as a consequence of many subjects' yearning to locate in a stable position at least at some point in relation to this difference" (204).

Finally, in his epilogue, Prosser examines the paradox of transsexual representation through photographs in autobiographies: "photographs of transsexuals are situated on a tension between revealing and concealing transsexuality. Their primary function is to expose the transsexual body; yet how to achieve this when transsexuality on the body is that which by definition is to be concealed?" (209). Moving from simple portraits in older autobiographies to more self-consciously political images, Prosser details the ironies of representation, erasure, and gaze that construct these pictures.

This is an intelligent and original book that takes on difficult and much neglected questions in trans theory, and it would be a great teaching text for more advanced undergraduate and graduate students in literature, Women's Studies, or queer theory. Halberstam and Prosser have written closely related books with overlapping content: both devote chapters to John Radclyffe Hall and the discourse of inversion, as well as *Stone Butch Blues*, and to representations of butches or transsexed subjects (in film

and photography, respectively). Both authors are avowedly personally invested in their scholarly projects. Pragmatically, this makes these excellent companion books for teaching purposes; theoretically, it's a promising juxtaposition because the arguments are significantly different.

What is this contrast? Halberstam is concerned with identifying and making more inhabitable the spaces between genders, bodies, and sexualities. Her theoretical inclination is always to detach one identity label from another, to point to the erasure of experience and possibility that any reduction causes, most notably the reduction of masculinity to an effect of male bodies. Prosser, by contrast, emphasizes materiality, flesh, and complex kinds of authenticity. He seeks to bring transsexuality home, out of the theoretical spaces of queer theory where, he maintains, it has become a trope that celebrates an imagined possibility rather than a tangible, grounded experience: "in pushing past a transsexual narrative ("post"), in ceding our claims to sexed location, we relinquish what we do not yet have: the recognition of our sexed realness; acceptance as men and women; fundamentally, the right to gender homes" (204). Halberstam engages this aspect of Prosser's work at some length in her chapter on butch/FTM border wars, arguing: "The language that Prosser . . . use[s] to defend [his] particular transsexual project from queer appropriations runs the risk not only of essence and even colonialism, but . . . of using the loaded language of migration and homecoming to ratify new, distinctly unqueer models of manliness" (170). This particular criticism is well-taken. Of the three books, Prosser is least attentive to dynamics of race and class, and this omission is related to his investment in the realness of trans identity. This problem is in turn related to my criticisms of Feinberg, and it signals an impasse in transsexual studies: does any attempt to theorize transsexual authenticity necessarily mark an evasion of normative questions about gender expression? How can gender be simultaneously understood as a fundamental part of self, and deconstructed, transformed, and criticized? These questions are, of course, also feminist questions, for non-trans women as much as for any trans subject, again illustrating the important connections and overlap between trans and Women's Studies.

Reading Transgender

Watching these arguments play out reveals that all three authors face a complicated political struggle: so much academic literature over-determines and erases the agency of the trans subject in favor of the grasp of technology, medical discourses, history qua regimes of power, or false consciousness. On the other hand, so much popular literature is clearly naively essentialist in its understanding of transsexual experience: tropes of wrong body, being "born that way," ontological necessity, and histori-

cal and cultural universality tend to be grossly under-theorized, and easily feed into other essentializing discourses about sex and gender. Put these two trends together with the crucial insistence that trans subjects speak in their own voices and mobilize politically around less oppressive self-understandings, and writers in the area have an almost impossible task of navigation, negotiation, and representation.

These tensions notwithstanding, the field of transsex/gender studies has clearly reached a new stage of maturity. There is a complexity and political acumen to these books that should permanently foreclose the dismissal of trans studies by skeptics, and render hopelessly dated the kind of radical feminist critique of transgender that has had currency in certain circles. There was a time when I sensed that trans studies was playing catch-up with feminism, trying to overcome the damaging legacy of Janice Raymond's work and related negative sentiment among non-trans feminists suspicious of transsexuals in particular. That time is truly past, and these books sit alongside the work of, for example, Kate Bornstein, Jason Cromwell, Jacob Hale, Henry Rubin, Sandy Stone, and Susan Stryker as evidence of the sophistication, complexity, and internal heterogeneity of this field of scholarship and activism.

Many questions need to be further explored: what account of subjectivity and agency will be adequate to the task of making sense of the experience of transsexuality? What ethnographic methods work best, and what are their pitfalls, when it comes to collecting information on trans subcultures and individuals? How can authors theorize their investments in particular constructions of identity without reducing theory to a justification of themselves? How are very different self-understandings and life projects among trans theorists to be negotiated or reconciled? How should non-trans feminists engage this literature, or conduct their own work on trans issues?[2] What normative demands can fairly be made of the various players in these debates, especially in terms of transforming themselves? Feminists of all stripes should pay close attention to emerging answers to these questions, not least because they have a lot to offer in rethinking the ever-shifting categories of "women's" studies.

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Notes

1. Feinberg prefers to be described with the pronouns "hir" (in place of her/his) and "ze" (in place of he/she).

2. For a set of injunctions in answer to this question, see Jacob Hale, "Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans——," http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/~sandy/hale.rules.html.

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