

# Reviews

Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism*  
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This book examines, in a commendably sympathetic and sensitive style, transsexuality, gender dysphoria and transgenderism in the twentieth century. It combines history, interviews, cultural analysis and personal anecdotes in an attempt to give the reader some idea of the way differently-gendered people's perceptions of themselves and the perceptions of those outside the gender community have evolved and draws attention to some of the complex medical, sexual, political and social issues these phenomena present.

The author contrasts early transsexual autobiographies (Christine Jorgensen, Jan Morris, Mario Martino) with more contemporary personal accounts of transsexuals (Renee Richards, Mark Rees) and differently-gendered persons (Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein). While the former transsexuals appear to adopt a particularly deferential and compliant attitude toward the medical community and its epistemological paradigms (no doubt an effect of marginalisation and existing power relations) which privilege specific bodies, gender practices and heterosexual desire as well as diminishing the importance of sexual pleasure, more contemporary accounts witness an increasing challenge to medical orthodoxy.

Thus Renee Richards' autobiography deals with the previously taboo subject of pre-operative sexual pleasure while Mark Rees proved critical of the quality of care he was given and rather than fade into the background post-surgically, as medically scripted, became a fierce activist on behalf of transgendered young people. Further, while Rees' sexual orientation is heterosexual his autobiography refers to the non-heterosexual desire of 'one female-to-male friend' while post-operative gender outlaw Kate Bornstein refuses to identify as either male or female, gay or straight. Thus in various ways some transsexual/transgender persons have become increasingly political in the 1980s and 1990s. This has involved a changing relationship with the medical profession coming close in some instances to an uncoupling. Califia points to a shift away from pleading for treatment for a medical condition, gender dysphoria, toward a challenge to the binary gender system which is itself viewed as dysfunctional. While fierce debates rage within transgendered communities there is increasing resistance to the idea and practice of 'passing' and the emergence of an in your face gender ambiguity — an Act Up style of gender activism.

However, the realisation of the life possibilities of differently-gendered people has not only depended upon challenging medical orthodoxy. As Califia rightly points out the textual violence perpetrated against differently-gendered persons is by no means confined to the gender scientists. In large measure the politicisation of transgender communities can be accounted for as a response to what Califia describes as transphobia within feminism and gay academia.

Feminist fundamentalism, as Califia describes work such as that of Janice Raymond (*The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, 1979, Beacon Press, Boston), sought to exclude transgender women, including transgender lesbians, from women's

space. In this respect Califia highlights the oppressive nature of rigid styles of identity politics. However, the juxtaposing of genetic women and transgender women and the characterisation of the latter as counter revolutionaries set the stage for something of a reverse discourse whereby transgendered persons sought to challenge essentialised notions of sex/gender and opened up pathways for the queering of those notions.

In a separate chapter gay academia is taken to task for its appropriation of differently-gendered persons both living and dead. Attempts to inscribe 'gayness' upon differently-gendered historical figures represents an act of textual violence — an erasure of particular histories. The attempt to code individuals as 'gay', which is always problematic when applied across time and space, is especially offensive when applied to groups such as the North American Indian berdache who would resist attempts to describe their desires as same-sex. While Califia doesn't say so, the example of the berdache highlights the need for an engagement between queer theory and post-colonial/critical race theory.

Califia devotes a chapter to a previously neglected group, the partners of transgendered people (invisible gender outlaws). In opposition to medical insistence upon an inverse relationship between gender identity and sexual desire she highlights the proliferation of shades of identification and desire. Some partners of transgendered persons are refusing to identify as 'heterosexual', 'lesbian' or 'gay' and in a number of cases partners are themselves transgendered. This latter strategy has subversive potential in that it opposes the assumption that a transgendered person needs to have his or her gender identity bolstered by intimate affirmation from someone whose self-image is consistent with his or her genetic sex.

It will be interesting to see how medical, feminist and gay and lesbian positions develop in response to transgender activism. Like Califia I would hope that rigid gender/sexual positionalities within feminism and gay and lesbian politics do not continue to forestall the radical political potential offered by transgender persons.

The book will be of interest, across a range of academic disciplines, to those who have an interest in sexual and gender politics.

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