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Gayle Salamon

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BOYS OF THE LEX

TRANSGENDERISM AND RHETORICS OF MATERIALITY

Gayle Salamon

San Francisco, historically and practically the epicenter of North American queer culture, has exactly one lesbian bar.¹ There are, of course, plenty of opportunities for lesbians to meet and frolic throughout the city, and on most nights of the week, one can easily find a club or bar hosting a “women’s night” or, barring that, some other lesbian-friendly space. But San Francisco’s only seven-days-a-week self-proclaimed “dyke bar” is the Lexington Club. The club regularly advertises in local newspapers as “a totally *gay* club where every night is ladies’ night.” The Lex, as it is affectionately termed by its patrons, sold a calendar for the year 2002 titled “‘Boys’ of the Lex,” which features individual photos of the club staff—bartenders, barbacks, door boys, bookkeepers, and Ace Morgan, the calendar’s photographer—and each of these “boys” reads as transgressively masculine.

Morgan’s photograph of Mr. December shows Lila, the founder and owner of the bar (fig. 1). She stands next to Armon, a seated man whose cheeks are covered with shaving lather, and holds his goatee in one hand and a straight razor poised carefully next to his face in the other. The photograph is set not in the Lexington Club but in the Eagle Tavern, a local leathermen’s bar, attested to by the groups of burly daddies that populate the background of the photograph and by the baseball cap emblazoned with the bar’s logo that Armon (an Eagle bartender) is wearing. The circulation of masculinity within the photograph is a complicated one; Lila “reads” as female, but it is her masculinity that is foregrounded, both literally and figuratively, against the male bodies in the background. Armon’s position is not quite submissive—he looks directly into the lens with a sly smile—yet his bearded and masculine face is vulnerably close to the razor that hovers in front of it. Lila is in charge of the scene, not only of the man she is about to shave but also, in some more expansive sense, of the scene of masculinity as it is played



Figure 1. Lila, Mr. December, "Boys of the Lex," 2002. Photograph by Ace Morgan

out in the leathermen's bar. The photograph cites the stereotype of the butch lesbian as castrating woman, threatening masculinity with a knife at the ready.² Yet the postures of the men in the background are relaxed and friendly, and the sense of danger in the tableaux of the foregrounded figures is softened by the stance of the two bodies in relation to one another, which is more tender than aggressive. The butch lesbian is not assaulting masculinity but homoerotically engaging with it.

The photograph represents a kind of masculine homoerotic, though the common understanding of homoeroticism or homosexuality as "love of the same" is insufficient for understanding how this eroticism depends on difference and alterity, at the level of sex, of gender, and of bodies. For if this is an erotics of similarity, it is a similarity that is crucially circuited through difference. We might assume that all the subjects in the photograph are "of" the same gender (and we might or might not be right), yet they are clearly not of the same sex, and the photograph's erotic power is generated by this difference within sameness. The locations and intersections of difference and identity become difficult to parse: the calendar uses an image of a gay leathermen's bar to promote the Lexington Club, "a totally *gay* club" (which reads as a tongue-in-cheek assertion of a gayness that is not quite lesbian and not quite male homosexuality) "where every night is ladies' night" (where those "ladies" are all identified as boys). In this context, *homoerotic*



Figure 2. Bre, Coverboy, “Boys of the Lex,” 2002. Photograph by Ace Morgan

is an unhelpfully flat adjective that cannot quite keep up with the libidinous and identificatory refractions that the image produces. The display of the photograph and its contextual use might better be called *homoerratic*: a libidinal economy of sameness whose participants nevertheless wander or stray from their customary or expected courses in unpredictable and surprising ways and whose energy depends on the very unfixability of those erotic identifications and exchanges.

If the Lexington Club is where the women are, it is also where the boys are, and for the boys of the Lex, this seems to be one and the same category. Bre, the cover boy of the calendar, is perched on a rooftop overlooking San Francisco’s Mission District (fig. 2) and is eating a layer cake that reads, in piped-on frosting, “my cake.” Is there some sense in which being one of “the ‘boys’ of San Francisco’s only fulltime lesbo bar” (as the photograph’s caption reads) is an instance of being able to have one’s cake and eat it, too? What understandings of sex and gender, of bodies and relation, make such identifications possible?

I would suggest that this calendar, as an artifact of queer sexual culture, offers a corrective to one of the more persistent critiques in gender, and especially transgender, studies: that queer theory, with its valorization of flux, instability, and all things postmodern, ignores or minimizes the implications of gender as it

is lived in “real life.” This call for a return to “real” gender, as opposed to gender as it is merely “theorized,” draws a distinction between gender as it is conceptualized and gender as it is lived, where the latter is thought to somehow expose the former as either hopelessly utopian conjecture or—worse—bent on dissolving the “reality” of gender as it is embodied. This division, which posits the materiality of the body as a stable ground against the wild proliferations of a supposedly disembodied and disengaged theorizing, has the effect of flattening out “theory” to the point of caricature.

To theorize gender, to ask after the ways in which bodies inhabit different sexes and genders and what social structurings make those inhabitations possible, is not to suggest that any of those categories are incidental or meaningless. How we embody gender *is* how we theorize gender, and to suggest otherwise is to misunderstand both theorization and embodiment. To offer the category of real gender in an attempt to discipline what are perceived as the excesses of theoretical gender is to domesticate gender as it is lived and to deny its considerable complexity, which often outpaces our language to describe it. It is undeniable that queering gender is not only theoretical work. But it is also surely the case that those everyday instances of embodying transgressive gender that might at first seem far removed from academic discourse are performed with a complexity and a self-awareness that are rendered invisible if we understand them as simply opposed to a theorizing that is unnecessarily complicated and complicating. What the boys of the Lex demonstrate is that gender as it is lived and embodied is, in some powerful sense, always already theorized. When a distinction is made between the theorizing and the performance of gender expression, we might do well to ask who or what such a distinction serves.

“Social Construction” and Its Discontents

Within the emerging field of transgender studies, many writers have suggested that queer theory’s most profound legacy has been the advancement of social construction as a way to understand gender and embodiment. Although some writers understand transgenderism as evidence of the social constructedness of bodies, a growing number contend that transgenderism presents a challenge to the theory of social construction, that the materiality of the transgendered body exposes social construction as a fiction, and a dangerous one. It is particularly striking that social construction is still identified as problematic or dangerous for transpeople by texts unconcerned with the details or trajectories of academic debates about social construction.

Trans writers have articulated at least three objections to social construc-

tion: it is simple, where gendered embodiment is complex, it is inattentive to or dismissive of the reality of bodily materiality, and it offers no room for bodily resignification or resistance. I want to contend that each of these objections hinges on a fundamental misreading of the meaning of social construction and a misunderstanding of the use to which it has been put in theorizing gender.

In *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*, Leslie Feinberg argues that transgendered people have been rendered historically invisible by a culture that abhors gender difference. Feinberg suggests that theory has a role to play in helping mobilize social change because it can “counsel action,” yet she also suspects that the category is general in a way that removes it from “real life.” “History is the record of past experience. Theory is the generalization of that experience. It’s that simple.”³ If history, theory, and their relation are “simple” things, so for Feinberg is the idea that theory uses to explain gender: social construction. She states: “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.”⁴ Social construction, in this view, is something *simple*, an adjective that wants to modify both *social* and *construction*. The social realm that produces gender oversimplifies it by legislating only two possible choices, and social construction’s unsatisfying simplicity is related to the role of theory as a “generalization of experience”: neither is able to account for experiences that deviate significantly from the norm. The transmission of this insufficiently general experience is also seen as simple, that which is transmitted by rote to passive subjects. Social construction becomes something akin to a grammar lesson, and the active work of living a gender is seen as a poetic opposition to a strict grammar of gender as legislated somehow from above.

I will return to the implications of this linguistic metaphor below, noting here only that Feinberg’s analogy to language in her rejection of social construction posits an active subject who exists—and embodies gender—outside the constriction of the social realm. A similar, if perhaps more emphatic, objection to social construction comes from James Green, who writes that “thanks to the feminist critique, we can now say ‘gender is a social construction’, as if we are above it all.”⁵ Green does not specify whose critique—indeed, whose feminism—this might be and offers us a picture of social construction as that which is unconnected to lived gender, something that obscures, or even threatens, the stakes of gender, a gender that ostensibly exists for subjects and bodies outside simplistic “constructions.” Social construction sets gender apart from the bodies that live it, hovering above, behind, or below a transgendered subject whose experiences of gender are unconstrained by any of its constructions.

These writers see social construction as simple and lived gender as complex. Conversely, some trans writers take the opposite approach, chastising social constructionism for obscuring the simple, material fact of bodies with linguistic abstraction and complexity. In Jay Prosser's account, the materiality of the transsexual body "gives the lie to social construction," where a dysphoric relation to the body asserts a truth—again, a simple truth—over and against the abstruse tangle of complicated theories of gender.⁶ Jason Cromwell, another author who writes on FTM (female-to-male) identity, questions the connection often made in trans studies between bodily dysphoria and the certainty of the body itself: "If I have the wrong body, whose body do I have and where is my body?"⁷ But if the certainty of bodily dysphoria is for Cromwell unable to deliver an ontological certainty about bodies, it does produce a body unmarked by social construction, a body that exists in defiance of, and resistance to, theories about the body. "The phenomenological body," he writes, "is a site of resistance to sex and gender ideologies . . . for transpeople."⁸ In both of these cases, social construction is viewed as false because the social prescriptions that determine normative gender fail to "take"—the resistance of the transgendered body to materialize a normative gender is seen as a failure of that construction. Social construction is consequently seen as a mechanism able to produce only normatively gendered bodies, while nonnormative gender configurations presumably exist outside the realm of "gender ideologies" altogether. In this view, transpeople undermine gender completely because of the material specificity of their differently gendered bodies.

This premise that the materiality of the transgendered body renders transgendered people outside or beyond gender leads to the assertion that what characterizes transgenderism, along with a specific kind of embodiment, is a specific kind of *agency*, and it is on this issue of agency that critiques of social constructionism are most assertively advanced. Social constructionism is seen as a force whose purpose is to limit, alternately, the ability of transpeople to self-define or their claims to an "authentic" embodiment or the very possibility of transgenderism itself. Green contends that social construction renders the agency of transgendered people invisible: "I believe gender belongs to each individual, to do with as he or she pleases: it is not possible for an 'objective' observer to paste gender on another person."⁹ Cromwell contends that "transpeople are not like other people. Rather than allowing society to dictate who and what they are, they define themselves."¹⁰ Kate Bornstein says that "those of us who are questioning gender ought to be able to name ourselves apart from the troublesome institutions" that determine gender.¹¹ Social construction is presented as the powerful force that inhibits such attempts at self-definition and agency, and Green suggests that it imperils

gender itself, stating that we must “attempt to wrest gender loose from the grip of social constructionism.”¹² In her *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, Viviane Namaste goes even further, claiming that, because of its commitment to social constructionism, “queer theory as it is currently practiced needs to be rejected for both theoretical and political reasons.”¹³

Social construction is thus viewed as too simple to have any relevance to transgenerism yet so powerful that it threatens not only transpeople but gender itself. One wonders exactly what it is that is passing for social construction in these conversations. It would be difficult to find a proponent of social construction who claims that it is a simple process, or that its effects are inconsequential, or that it places us—normatively gendered and transgendered alike—somehow “above it all,” as Green contends. Perhaps this is why social construction circulates in many articles about transgenerism, popular and academic alike, without reference to the history of its use or to any individual authors who have used it, and why writers attacking social construction seem to be referring to many different theories and ideas, all of which get grouped under one rubric.

Social Construction and Bodily History

Some clarifications would seem to be in order. Social construction is not the same as a *social constricton*, or *social role*, or *social control*, or *cultural expectation*. It does not mean *not real* or *unimportant*. Social construction is not synonymous with performativity or queer theory, though it is importantly connected to both. To claim that the body is socially constructed is not to claim that it is not real, that it is not made of flesh, or that its materiality is insignificant. To claim that sex is a social construct is not to claim that it is irrelevant, or invariant, or incapable of being embodied or reworked. To claim that our experiences of our sexed and gendered bodies are socially constructed is not to claim that our experiences are fictive, or inessential, or less important than our theorizing about sexed and gendered bodies.

What, then, is meant when we say that the body is a social construct? It means that our bodies are always shaped by the social world in which we are inescapably situated. This cultural shaping happens at the conceptual level, in that what we are able to imagine about what our bodies are or may become—even to decide what “counts” as a body and what does not—is structured by the history of how bodies have been socially understood, by what bodies have been. But that imagining is not only a conceptual act, not “merely” a theoretical undertaking; the same social forces that constitute a body as culturally legible or illegible also

shape the very feelings of embodiment that would seem to be most personal, most individual, and most immune to regulatory injunction. What we feel about our bodies is just as “constructed” as what we think about them, and the power of social construction as a model of understanding embodiment stems from its insistence that these categories are not separate but always intertwined.

Social construction must not be construed oppositionally to a “felt sense” of bodily being, for one can contend both that a body is socially constructed and that its felt sense is undeniable. What social construction offers is a way to understand *how* that felt sense arises, in all of its historical and cultural variations, with all of its urgency and immediacy, and to ask what it is, finally, that is delivered by that felt sense. This tension between the historicity of the body and the immediacy of its felt sense is the precise location of bodily being, and mapping this tension is the work of both transgender studies and theories of social construction alike. Cromwell suggests that theorizing transgenderism requires a middle course between essentialism and constructionism, asserting that

neither alone can account for individual experiences. Both sides of the coin contribute to the whole. Rather than viewing bodies, sexes, genders, and sexualities as either essentialist (nature) or constructionist (nurture) and flipping the coin periodically to explain the behaviors of persons, both theories must be taken into account. People do feel that aspects of their being are essential (natural), yet they know that what they feel is due in part to how the dominant society constructs (nurtures) ideologies seen as pertinent to being an embodied, sexed, gendered, and sexual being.¹⁴

Cromwell is trying to offer a middle position, supplementing constructionism with an affirmation of the felt sense of the body that, he suggests, can be secured only through recourse to essentialism. Yet his last sentence is not a description of a compromise between essentialism and constructionism but is, in fact, a description of social construction. Claiming that the body *feels* natural is not the same as claiming that it *is* natural.

There is perhaps no discipline or school of thought that has considered this terrain more thoroughly than phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological work on embodiment, in particular, makes elegant and productive use of this tension. People do indeed feel that aspects of their being (in this case, their bodies) are natural and essential and that unexamined feeling is itself essential to embodiment. I do not need to consider the history of the body, or even the personal history of my own body, to inhabit it phenomenologically. Moving through life as

an embodied subject—eating, writing, sleeping, walking to the store—does not depend on a constant consideration and evaluation of the forces that have shaped, and continue to shape, my body. Indeed, bodily life would grind to a halt were such awareness required; our proprioceptive relationship to the body is, of necessity, unexamined during daily life. The phenomenological body presents itself as simply “there,” as unproblematically available to me. Yet this simple givenness is a fiction, albeit a necessary one. Anything that I might do with my body, any action that I perform with it, any way that I inhabit it acquires legibility only in the context of all of my body’s previous actions, positions, and modes of being.

The social aspects of my body, that sedimented history of which it is composed, do not disappear even if the ease of my proprioceptive possession of my body renders its social aspects invisible. The force of my conviction about the certainty of my own body paradoxically obscures the social realm and the formative role it plays in making embodiment legible. The social realm might seem to disappear or fade away, but its effects do not, even when they are unattended to, even when they “pass” as natural. The body is always *subtended by its history*. The body is felt as an immediate reality, situated in the spatial “here” and the temporal “now,” and the presentness of our bodies to us—and of the things our bodies deliver to us—feels absolute. Yet as a perceived and perceiving entity, the body depends on a substratum of history, even if that history is invisible in the more mundane course of everyday life. “Perception,” Edmund Husserl writes, “is related only to the present. But this present is always meant as having an endless past behind it and an open future before it.”¹⁵

How are we to understand that obscured history and its relation to the bodies that it subtends? Michel Foucault states in the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* that his project in *The History of Sexuality* has been to uncover and write a “history of truth.” That truth is excavated and read through a history of bodies, viewed as sites of power and resistance. Bodies can only be understood, only become legible, through their historically contingent specificity. A body does not exist as a naturally given phenomenon for Foucault; the “natural” body is produced through subjection, a social construct masquerading as a natural entity.¹⁶ Understanding bodies is necessary if we are to understand power because bodies are both produced by and bear the evidence of a power that is nonlocalized and dispersed; it is recognizable only through its effects, which are often bodily effects. If we must understand bodies to understand power, it is conversely true that we must understand power to understand bodies. Discipline, for example, is a kind of power that cannot be reduced to the institutions or apparatuses through which it flows, although its effects can be seen in and on the bodies it regulates. The

disciplinary regimes that produce bodies as sexed and gendered may be visible in certain institutions, or particular medical technologies, or instances of bodily violence, but discipline itself is none of these things. Foucault writes that “‘discipline’ may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology.”¹⁷

An example of disciplinary power’s nonlocalized effects, one with particular resonance to transpeople, might be gendered restrooms.¹⁸ Restrooms are precarious terrain for the genderqueer, and the decision as to which door to enter is not always an easy or obvious one, particularly for butches or FTMs at an early stage of transition. If a butch chooses the women’s room, the “proper” choice for the sex to which sie is assumed to belong if sie is not able to “pass,” sie risks stares, hostile commentary, or getting chased right out by women alarmed that a “man” has entered (either mistakenly or with predacious intent). If sie enters the men’s room and fails to pass, sie risks worse. Segregated restrooms are obvious instantiations of the binary gender system, but cannot be said to *be* that system. The power to enforce a gender binary is not located in any one particular restroom or in the women and men who might police that territory against the genderqueer; it is instead dispersed through an entire matrix of “instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets.” If this power cannot be localized or identified, this does not lessen its effects or force, a force that increases in proportion to the extent that a single instantiation of that power becomes ontologized. Consider, for instance, those stylized stick-figure silhouettes on restroom doors: they do not merely refer to gender but are perfectly abstracted icons *of* gender, depicting no activity or action other than ontology and differentiation, or perhaps ontology through differentiation.

A reading of gender, then, that focuses exclusively on the agency of the individual misses this entire matrix of power in which gender takes shape. The fact that power is always implicated in embodiment, but varies in the degree to which that implication is made manifest, is overlooked by Cromwell and Green in their descriptions of the interactions between gender as it is socially understood and gender as it is lived, and this oversight leads to one difficulty with Cromwell’s description of sociality:

According to performative theory, gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” by members of society who thus express masculinity or femininity. That people “do gender” in the presence of others

(West and Zimmerman 1987:126) may have some validity. Even when alone, however, people have and manifest a gender. If gender were only important in social situations, then transpeople would not know that their gender is different than what societies dictate they should be according to their bodies. Transpeople do not take off gender as though it were clothing. Contrary to Judith Butler's statement about there being "no gender identity behind the expressions of gender" (1990:25), gender and gendered identity are, and feel, basic to beingness.¹⁹

This last observation that gender and gendered identity feel "basic to beingness" would seem to be vital. But Cromwell's understanding of the social world is a curious one here. Not only does there exist for Cromwell an "outside" to the social, all one need do to access it is shut the door to one's room. But "social" does not, of course, mean in the room with other people, and conflating the two reduces the social so narrowly as to render the category entirely useless. I may shut the world out, but this does not make it go away, nor does my own constriction of focus make its effects any less real. Equally problematic is Cromwell's assessment of Butler's theory of performativity—that gender is freely chosen and just as easily discarded, that it is merely playful theatricality. The misreading is a common one, though Butler herself has been very clear that this is a fundamental misunderstanding of her position. The idea that "one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night" would require "a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided *by* gender. Certainly, such a theory would restore a figure of a choosing subject—humanist—at the center of a project whose emphasis on construction seems to be quite opposed to such a notion."²⁰

It is here where the divide between social constructionism and the theories advanced by trans writers is difficult to bridge. For it is exactly such a choosing subject that many trans writers are championing, a subject to whom gender "belongs," in Green's words, to "do with as he or she pleases." If it is true, as Cromwell asserts, that transpeople are uniquely able to "define themselves," what sort of theory of subjectivity is being offered here, and how is it capable of bringing into being fully autonomous subjects whose agency is so unbounded that it exceeds the social realm itself?

The Grammar of Gender

In these accounts, the transgendered subject can be distinguished from the normatively gendered subject by the specificity of hir embodiment and by hir ability to self-define apart from the oppressive social structures that determine gender. But this call for an autonomous subject who freely chooses hir gender is complicated by the way language circulates within that call. To define oneself is a linguistic act, and even if that act of self-definition is offered in opposition to mandates of identity that feel somehow imposed from above, this does not place that project of self-definition outside either the linguistic or the social realm. If gender labels could be easily rejected or “torn off,” as Bornstein suggests, there would be no way to account for their power, or their persistence. Any argument asserting the importance of self-definition for transpeople must already recognize the power of language and of naming in the process of subject formation.

Language is figured as that which is able to deliver a stable and coherent identity to transpeople, but also that which obscures it. Green writes that “gender studies are focused on the social differences between persons with (presumably) male and female bodies. This is not really talking about gender, but about sociology and politics, which are fine, important topics, but they still are not gender. . . . When are we going to really talk about gender? Not until we learn to separate gender from the language we have traditionally used to describe it.”²¹ Green’s frustration with the inability of gender studies to “really talk about gender” is at its core a frustration with language itself. This frustration is understandable: gender, in this view, is something that exists apart from politics, apart from sociology and theory, something that must be separated from language in order to be seen clearly, and the labor of elucidating that which escapes language through the use of language itself is a formidable and frustrating task indeed.

For Green, gender is located at the bodily level yet is not reducible to the body. Green defines gender as the internal conviction—ostensibly produced with no interference from the social realm—that one is either male or female. But “male” and “female” are social categories, and the very fact that an internal conviction can deliver such a powerful certainty about one’s individual sense of belonging to, or being alienated from, either category attests to the inseparability of one’s own experience of gender and the larger social classifications that determine it. Gender is a bodily phenomenon, yet in the case of transsexuals it is unyoked from the morphology of the body, with which it is in conflict. Green emphasizes the internal feeling of dysphoria that attends transsexuality, suggesting that it is this feeling that is central to transsexuals’ senses of themselves. The implications of

basing subjectivity on a feeling of dysphoria are not altogether benign and would seem to construct that subjectivity in absolute negativity, opposed to both bodily morphology and conventional categories of gender.

In this account, the felt sense of the body delivers a certainty about identity, and though that felt sense might arise from a complicated nexus of body and psyche, the feeling itself is described as simple—the conviction that one is either a man or a woman—and as powerful and incontestable evidence of a coherent identity. Yet this feeling is unlocatable (it does not arise from or correspond to the morphology of the body) and is incontestable (it is not subject to question or doubt but presents itself as a “natural” fact). The felt sense of identity can, by virtue of its unlocatability, be said to arrive *from elsewhere*; the embodied subject can neither control nor reform it. He cannot name its origin or dispute what it asserts; he can only submit to it. In the case of gender dysphoria, a felt sense of identity carries with it an alienness, an otherness that determines its origins and its trajectory, even as it presents itself as the most internal of phenomena. It would seem problematic to suggest that such a subject possesses an absolute agency to determine his or her gender identity if the conviction about that identity hinges on a feeling that is impossible to resist and compels submission rather than conferring any sort of mastery.

Green is surely right that bodily feeling is deeply personal and vital to subjectivity, no matter how that subject’s gender is configured. Were bodily feeling able to deliver a certainty about either the body or the identity of the self apart from the body, it would be able to do so only because it is structured like language.

The Substance of Gender

We have seen that some trans writers have suggested a return to the “real” of the body in thinking transgenderism and that transgendered subjectivity hinges on a certain kind of linguistic agency. Some of the troubling consequences of this approach to thinking transsubjectivity can be seen in the works of several critics of transgenderism, who see the phenomenon as evidence that the real of the body is resistant to ideologies of gender and that transgenderism is defined by a series of linguistic acts.²² Bernice Hausman understands “the demand for sex change,” which takes the form of “hormonal treatment and plastic genital surgery,” to be “the most important indicator of transsexual subjectivity.”²³

Hausman is able to advance this claim through her neatly tautological definition of *transsexual*: she limits the scope of her argument to those persons who

have undergone sex reassignment surgeries, which excludes most female-to-male transsexuals, transsexuals who undergo partial surgeries or no surgeries at all, transsexuals whose only bodily interventions are hormonal, and—perhaps most important—transgendered people. Thus “demand” for sex change surgery is the most important indicator of transsexual subjectivity because the category “transsexual” includes only those people who demand sex change, rather than encompassing all people who feel themselves to be members of a sex that their bodily morphologies do not manifest. Hausman mentions transgenderism briefly in her epilogue, noting that the “broadening of [medical] diagnostic criteria may also have encouraged the development of ‘transgenderism’ as an optional position for those subjects experiencing ‘gender dysphoria’” (130), indicating that transgenderism, like transsexuality, is a medically created condition, even if its “sufferers” do not choose any medical intervention at the bodily level. Transgenderism, in this account, is a limbo of sorts, an “optional” position for those who desire, but cannot obtain, sex reassignment surgery: transgendered people are merely pretranssexuals. Hausman is skeptical of the claim that some transpeople may not desire bodily intervention, taking this as evidence of the power of the body’s materiality:

If there are subjects willing to live with partial sex change (usually hormonal, without surgery), this may be an indication that the attempts at technological sex change do not achieve the changes desired. This would be precisely because the body does not accommodate all of the procedures of “sex change”; the body, in other words, resists making “gender” real. . . . What we must do is rethink the body as the site for sexual signification. Theorizing the body means taking it seriously as a material structure that exceeds the power of language to inscribe its functions. (199–200)

In Hausman’s version of transsexuality, then, we are faced with an autonomous subject whose “demand” through language brings himself, and his social world, into being. This autonomous subject is yoked to a body that, paradoxically enough, is vulnerable to neither the power of language nor any ideologies of gender, a body that stubbornly manifests a sex that is fundamentally unalterable.

Hausman suggests that medical professionals created the very idea of gender to legitimate sex reassignment surgeries for transsexuals. Gender becomes the logic by which a transsexual can claim a (false) identity as a member of a sex that his or her body does not manifest. Medical professionals script the narrative that transsexuals must follow to gain access to medical treatment and “be” a sex, and the idea of gender—understood as the notion that a sexual identity

might be unmoored from the bodily markers of sexual difference—is what makes this transition from “authentic” to “simulated” sex possible. It is in this sense that transsexuals are, Hausman writes, “the dupes of gender” (140). Because of the category of gender, transsexuals mistakenly suppose that the category of sex is a malleable one, and they themselves become the putative evidence of this malleability.

Yet if transsexuals are taken in by the ruse of gender, it is a ruse offered by the medical establishment in response to the demands of transsexuals themselves. Hausman offers a model of transsexual subjectivity in which they are “dupes” and also possess an agency so total that their desires legislate an ideology of gender that threatens to destroy sexual difference. Hausman dismisses the notion of gender performativity, regarding it as “playing at” sex over and against the bodily markers of real sex, yet her theory of the transsexual demand is strikingly performative:

Demanding sex change is therefore part of what constructs the subject as a transsexual: it is the mechanism through which transsexuals come to identify themselves under the sign of transsexualism and construct themselves as its subjects. Because of this, we can trace transsexuals’ agency through their doctor’s discourses, as the demand for sex change was instantiated as the primary symptom (and sign) of the transsexual. . . . the demand for sex change became the most significant symptom of transsexualism, its irrefutable sign. (110)

This focus on the demand as constituting transsexuality is taken from Catherine Millot, for whom “transsexuality involves an appeal, and especially a demand, addressed to the Other.”²⁴ Reading the demand for sex change as the “irrefutable sign” of transsexual identity and understanding that identity to be formed by the narratives that transsexuals offer to their doctors for access to medical services transforms it from a bodily phenomenon into a linguistic one; it is not the surgery that “makes” the transsexual but the demand itself. The demand magically imbues the transsexual with identity and subjectivity, and this is a linguistic act that never misfires, never fails.

Hausman’s presentation of the transsexual subject shows the dangers of understanding absolute agency as the hallmark of subjectivity. To present the transsexual as a figure of absolute agency in this way is to take the idea of the choosing subject to its most extreme extension. Her agency is so total that every desire becomes a demand, and her relation to gender cannot be properly described

as a choice, since she is able to bring the category of gender itself into being. In fact, transsexuals understand the medical and social histories that they report to their doctors as highly scripted and compelled, a set of necessary fictions into which they fit their experiences in order to be recognized as transsexual. Hausman reverses that formulation and reads those discourses as evidence of transsexuals' agency; official medical discourse is understood as an extension of the will of transsexuals themselves.

The poverty of the willful agent model for understanding transsexuality and transgenderism is brought into relief by this caricature of the all-powerful subject, which derives from a wild misreading of the power relations that determine sex and gender. This subject possesses a firm sense of identity unbroken by any rupture or dissonance, who freely chooses a satisfying configuration of gender and sex with which to identify or, failing that, reconfigures the very structures of sex and gender. All of her demands are met, and her control over her identifications and circumstances is both total and effortless, meeting with no resistance from social structures or cultural prohibitions. Such a subject does not reside in the social world as much as she creates a fully formed one around herself.

The description of transsexuals as people able to exert absolute control over their doctors, their bodies, and the categories of sex and gender stands in stark relief to their own descriptions of their exhausting and often unsatisfying attempts to negotiate the medical and legal systems through which sex change is officially conferred.²⁵ Hausman acknowledges this gap in her preface, which states that her book is about identity but "is not, however, about people," a remarkable claim for a text so distressed about the ways in which constructions, both social and "literal," enact an erasure of the real.²⁶ The real of the body, in Hausman's account, is the only brake on the monstrous power of transsexual subjectivity, a body whose materiality both foils transsexuals' attempts to reconfigure their identities and resists even the notion of "gender identity" itself, asserting its subordination to the real of already sexed morphology. It is unclear whether this description of bodily materiality can be interpreted as anything other than biological determinism of the most pernicious sort.

It is finally this "real" that most concerns Hausman, and, though their political aims are fundamentally opposed, she shares this concern with trans theorists. Like them, she insists that "what we must do is rethink the body as the site for sexual signification. Theorizing the body means taking it seriously as a material structure that exceeds the power of language to inscribe its functions" (200). This claim echoes Cromwell's understanding of the material body as "a

site of resistance to sex and gender ideologies” and Green’s demand that we leave language behind in order that we might “really” talk about gender.

Transcending the Real Thing

Since the injunction to do so comes from so many quarters, let us endeavor to take the body seriously in just this way, to see what might result. It is easy enough to grant that the body is a material structure; this much has never been disputed. If we are to understand the real body as opposed to linguistic inscription, it is in some important sense resistant to description, since description always inscribes that which it seeks to identify through naming. This resistance to signification would extend outward, protecting the body from the meddlesome speculations of philosophers and theorists, and also inward, defying our own efforts to make sense of our situatedness within it. The materiality of this body is immune to construction or transformation and to attempts to alter it from its natural and given state.

What sort of truth does this body contain? What the “real” body tells us—or, rather, what it silently displays, without benefit of language—is nothing. Considered only as a blunt materiality, severed from any psychic investments, it has no meaning at all. This body is mute and impenetrable, a fleshy monad that is only “Real” in the Lacanian sense of that word, foreclosed from language, symbolization, and meaning. It is a body that belongs to no one, in the sense that what it describes is unrecognizable as a phenomenologically lived body and hardly recognizable as human. It is unclear what is served in revering this body, or what ideal of embodiment it offers in return; no one could claim ownership of such a body—and who would want to? It has been argued that “treating the body as a manipulable thing suggests there are no psychic investments in it that require consideration.”²⁷ This is exactly wrong. Manipulation is what transforms psychic investments into bodily, lived investment; manipulation *is* investment. The psychic investments that we have in our bodies are not safeguarded or amplified by reverentially cordoning off its materiality into a realm untroubled by the messy tangles of inscription and meaning.

Though this real body would seem to have little relation to the phenomenologically lived body, the process by which we are asked to strip it of both its history and psychic investment is remarkably similar to the phenomenological reduction. Husserl considered phenomenology to be a method for understanding things as they are and not merely as they appear to be. Husserl’s famous declaration “to the things themselves!” was a call to establish an absolute certainty about existence.

This certainty can be achieved through what he called the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, an attitude toward the world that consists of suspending judgments about it, a bracketing off of what we know to determine how that knowledge comes about and to guarantee a correspondence between our knowledge of objects and those objects themselves. This bracketing, or reduction, is characterized by “the rigorous abstention from all knowledge claims involving transcendence and the consequent restriction of the critique of knowledge to claims concerning the domain of immanence.”²⁸

Transcendence is the process of inference by which we gather impressions and perceptions of the object toward which our consciousness is intended and impute to that object an existence in the world beyond our perceptions. The “problem” of transcendence is one of correspondence; we have no way of knowing if our perceptions of an object correspond with the object itself, hence we “infer,” rather than experience, an object that transcends our perceptions (59). Husserl says that we must suspend our “natural” attitude toward the world, in which the possibility of knowing the objects within it is taken for granted and the world and its objects appear as given, in order to replace it with a “philosophical attitude” that is a “reflection on the relation between the object and our knowledge of it” (16). Yet the phenomenological reduction is a means rather than an end, not a stopping point but a philosophical attitude that attempts to establish a ground for the possibility of knowledge. It is not meant to supplant our natural attitude toward the world—one cannot move “suspended” through the world—but rather to “win a new region of being, a region of individual being.”²⁹ Maurice Natanson describes the *epoché* as “psychological breath-holding” whose purpose is redemptive: Husserl is attempting to redeem the belief that undergirds the natural attitude toward the world and provide it with a firm and certain foundation. In this way it is less radical than linguistic idealism, since “with the performance of the *epoché*, the real world does not change in any way, nor does the phenomenologist.”³⁰ Through the reduction, the world is *for me*; “I possess in myself an essential individuality, self-contained, and holding well together in itself, to which all real and objectively possible experience and knowledge belongs.”³¹

This mode of being, sometimes termed “phenomenological idealism,” posits a being who, through a systematically implemented isolation from the world, restricts itself to that of which it has radical certitude; the ego contracts the world until it contains only the ego itself. Husserl stresses that the world as it exists outside the ego may still exist: “I do not deny this ‘world’ as though I were a sophist, I do not doubt that it is there as though I were a skeptic; but I use the phenomenological *epoché* which completely bars me from using any judgement that concerns

spatio-temporal existence.”³² As Natanson suggests, what we take for granted in our inhabitation of the natural attitude is not so much the existence of the world we inhabit but that that world is the same world others inhabit, that we all perceive the world in the same way. Embedded in the natural attitude is the assumption that the world is the same for others as it is for us.³³

The phenomenological reduction is thus useful as a tool for understanding how our natural attitude toward the world contains problematic presuppositions and allows us to view the world apart from the clouding hindrance of those suppositions. Through the evacuation from the ego of perspectives different from my own, the phenomenological approach secures the world as a site of difference, a difference prohibited by the natural attitude’s unquestioned assumption that “the world” has the same referent for any given subject. “The ‘I’ of the person must be released from the ‘we’ that binds it. Phenomenological reduction is a movement from the ‘I’ as a communally grounded reality to the ego as a source of what is ultimately the individual’s own, his ‘ownness,’ in Husserl’s language.”³⁴

Yet as Natanson notes, the phenomenological reduction cannot be a tool for thinking intersubjectivity, and Husserl himself was frustrated by the “problem of intersubjectivity.” Any communication or genuine interaction with others, rather than a disinterested contemplation of them, requires a withdrawal from the philosophical attitude and a reentry into the natural mode of being (195). This is Merleau-Ponty’s primary critique of the phenomenological reduction, and his insistence that the natural and philosophical attitudes toward the world (indeed, that body and psyche, or subject and world) can never be cleanly split caused him to conclude that “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”³⁵ Indeed, Merleau-Ponty seems to be gently admonishing Husserl for his faith in the reduction when he writes that “the world is not what I think, but what I live through” (xvii).

The operation of the phenomenological reduction produces a body strikingly similar to the “real” body proposed by some trans theorists in its isolation from historicity and lack of situatedness within a social world, but that body differs in two important respects. The first is the different notion of “real,” where for trans theorists “real” is equated with what is actual, what is materially given, that which resists theorizing and whose existence for the subject is beyond question. In phenomenological language, “real” means something quite different from this. “If there are worlds or real things at all, the empirical motivations which constitute them must be able to reach into my experience, and that of every single ego.”³⁶ This implies not so much that the object is one thing for many people but that it is many things for many people. A real object is a “complex of all of its possible

appearances,” containing within it the possibility of its own being for and from the perspective of any individual person (251). In this sense, what constitutes something as real is not its materiality but a horizon of possibility, an openness to all of the different experiences that it represents to any given person.

On its face, this might appear to be philosophical speculation of the worst sort, precisely the dismissal of the real world against which critics of theoretical and philosophical approaches to gender warn us. This view, however, misses the purpose toward which such speculative endeavors aim. The phenomenological project is not an attempt to do away with the real world, but rather to question our suppositions about that world so that we might see it more clearly and utterly. This is the second distinction between the real body thought as a nonsocial material thing and the real body that phenomenology offers; the former is real to the extent that it confirms what we already know (about materiality, about gender, about itself), and the latter is real because it points toward its own capacity to exceed what we suppose about it. To be real, in this sense, is to hold one’s body and one’s self open to the possibilities of what one *cannot* know or anticipate in advance. It is to be situated at materiality’s threshold of possibility rather than caught within a materiality that is at its core constricted, constrictive, and determining.

It could be protested that we have not “really” talked about gender yet, that we have responded to that call by offering only more linguistic abstraction and speculation, and this objection might not be altogether without merit. Perhaps we might conclude by returning to the boys of the Lex, to see if they might help lead us back to real gender. In the beginning of this essay I asked what understandings of gender, bodies, and their relation make an identification as a boy of the Lex possible. It is undeniably true that each of these boys has a real body, and each of them manifests a real gender, although neither of these categories can be simply determined by the other. All of them identify as boys in some way, though the degree to which this name captures their identities varies for each of them. Some of these boys consider themselves to be women, some of them relate themselves to that category only marginally, and some do not consider themselves women at all. Defenders of the notion of real bodily sex might respond that though “woman” might be a social category and thus lend itself to reconfiguration or resignification, the category of “female” is surely a biological one, and if the boys are not women they can safely be identified as female by virtue of their bodily morphology. But can we understand these boys to be female bodied? We might risk yet another departure from real gender in moving to the realm of representation (though is not gender always in some sense read through its representations?) to consider the photographs of their bodies: some of the boys photographed in the

calendar display the bodily markers of what is conventionally thought to signify female: a swell of the hip or a chest that is not entirely flat. But none of them are feminine, and some of them do indeed read as male bodied.

What might it mean to insist that these bodies are “really” female, to contend that they contain a truth about the identity of these boys that their gender presentations or identifications can never refute? What is served by insisting that their bodies make these boys women, even if those bodies are coded as more male than female—a coding legible to their friends, lovers, random passersby, themselves—other than the most rigidly deterministic and conservative notions of proper categories of sex and gender? It is not the notion of a women’s space that might be uncontaminated by masculinity, for the Lexington Club is full of not only boys who may or may not be women but femmes who do identify as women and who, as Butler puts it, “prefer that their girls be boys,” or, perhaps, want their “boys to be girls,”³⁷ and a growing number of boys who may or may not be women and who like their girls to be boys—an increasingly visible butch-on-butuh homoerratic. Though it cannot fail to have meaning, the body’s morphology does not in any of these instances script either identification or desire, and those who understand bodily morphology to be constitutive of a truth that exceeds ideologies of gender would do well to take seriously some of the ways in which gender is currently being lived.

Notes

1. This is, of course, an easy generalization; for an account of queer community formation as it is emerging elsewhere and otherwise, see Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
2. This can be read as both a citation and an inversion of Herb Ritts’s famous photograph of a very feminine Cindy Crawford shaving a besuited k.d. lang.
3. Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 14.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. James Green, “The Art and Nature of Gender,” in *Unseen Genders: Beyond the Binaries*, ed. Felicity Haynes and Tarquam McKenna (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 59–70.
6. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7. For an extended discussion of Prosser’s important interventions in debates about social construction and transgenderism within a psychoanalytic context, see Gayle Salamon, “The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3 (2004): 95–122.

7. Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 25.
8. *Ibid.*, 42. For a view of the phenomenological body as that which is singularly capable of resisting or defying both ideology and social construction, as well as a comparison between phenomenological and Foucauldian approaches to trans embodiment, see Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).
9. Green, "Art and Nature of Gender," 62.
10. Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs*, 43.
11. Kate Bornstein, paper presented at the University of California, Berkeley, April 27, 2000.
12. Green, "Art and Nature of Gender," 60.
13. Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9.
14. Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs*, 43.
15. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
16. Foucault understands the body to be produced through several different modes of regulation and control. Punishment is one of these modes; sexuality is another. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 155; and Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
17. *Ibid.*, 215.
18. For more on gender transgression and public restrooms, see Sally Munt, "Orifices in Space: Making the Real Possible," in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (London: Cassell, 1997), and *Toilet Training: Law and Order in the Bathroom* (2003), a film by Tara Mateik and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project.
19. Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs*, 42.
20. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), x.
21. Green, "Art and Nature of Gender," 60.
22. John Colapinto's presentation of the John/Joan case in *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), although not a critique of transsexuality per se, is a particularly conservative example of this trend. "Nature" made John a boy, and social constructionists tried to turn him into a girl; their failure, Colapinto contends, shows the indisputability of the nature of sexual difference.
23. Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 27, 3.

24. Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essays on Transsexuality* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1990), 141.
25. For autobiographical accounts of these negotiations, see Holly Devor, *FTM: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
26. Hausman, *Changing Sex*, xi.
27. Patricia Elliot and Katrina Roen, "Transgenderism and the Question of Embodiment: Promising Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 4 (1998): 231–61.
28. Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1964), 5.
29. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), 112.
30. Maurice Natanson, *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 58.
31. Husserl, *Ideas I*, 17.
32. *Ibid.*, 110.
33. Natanson, *Edmund Husserl*, 26.
34. *Ibid.*, 71.
35. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1962), 79.
36. Husserl, *Ideas I*, 150.
37. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 123.