



TRANS SANFRISCO

I.

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TRICK DIVE

The Albatross was a sea-goers' dive on the working end of San Francisco's waterfront. Years of grime grayed the derelict two-story building, so it blended easily into the fog that often masked the neighborhood from all but knowing eyes. Locked doors and boarded windows faced the street, and nothing directed the merely curious down the back alley toward the sign of the bird painted on an otherwise unmarked entrance. Inside, the few bikers and leath-erdaddies cruising rough trade stood out like black islands in the sea of sex-hungry sailors who elbowed past the slumming navy boys for their chance to be hustled by one of the whores who worked the crowd. Sometimes these sailors got that chance with me.

Karl stood at the pinball machine. A row of quarters lined the glass above the plunger, a row of empty brown bottles lined the floor beneath. How long since I'd seen him—two years? Two and a half? He stopped spending nights here after Maya moved in, and I came now only when business slowed. I hung back, waiting for him to drop more of his tip money into the slot, kill his latest beer, and launch another ball before I slid my hand between his thighs to pinch his leg. I pinched harder than I intended, and he yelped angrily as he spun around.

It took him longer to make me than was good for my vanity. When recognition welled up in his eyes at last, he leaned back against the machine, work-

ing the style of every tough guy in every B-movie he'd ever seen. Coal black eyes beneath bushy brows scanned me while he fished for something impressive to say.

"Of all the gin joints in all the world," he said, finally giving up, "she walks into mine."

"She," I repeated. "That word used to stick in your throat when you talked about me."

"Just something about the way you look tonight, big guy. No offense." His lingering gaze contradicted the contempt in his voice. As his eyes raked me, I saw in them the confused anger and inarticulate need on which I loved to feed. Then he turned coolly back to his game.

I studied myself in the big mirror behind the bar to our right. My calf-length black linen dress was slit nearly to the crotch. Its neckline plunged in a deep vee to reveal the scalloped edges of my bustier. Stainless steel sheathed the toes of my stiletto-heeled black leather pumps. Nice legs, subtle make-up and miles of curling blond hair said "femme" so convincingly most people failed to notice the masculine angularity of the body.

No woman, and certainly no man, would come into the Albatross advertising like that without having something to sell. I wore my shop sign over my left breast—a discreet bar-shaped pin from which small charms dangled: a noose, a pair of tiny handcuffs, a little leather whip. A roomy pouch slung over my right shoulder harbored working versions of the jewelry.

Once in this bar some dumb fuck of a tugboat pilot thought that just because I looked pretty and seemed available he could take me without asking or paying. He grabbed me in the john, and while he groped clumsily under my bra, I pulled thirty-six inches of piano wire from beneath my belt. I left a scar around his neck he'd be explaining for the rest of his life. The dumb fucks were bad, but the smart ones were worse, especially officers. Their condescension rankled me. They assumed that if I could cheek a rubber, I'd never read a book. It never occurred to them that a person with other options could choose to live this way. Fuck 'em, I'd tell myself. They can keep their attitude. I keep their money.

I turned back to my mark and slid my hand inside Karl's pants. I throttled his limp dick and squeezed rhythmically to make it waken and pulse. I leaned into him and peered around his bulk to watch him play. Before long, his meat stood rigid in my hand, demanding more attention than his game could spare, and the last ball rolled away. His breathing was ragged, and he put no more money into the machine.

“Cut your dick off yet?” The agitation in his voice was obvious.

“Now, Karl,” I cooed, dipping my head coyly to peer up at him, “what makes you think I’d tell something that personal to a lover who left me for another skirt?” When he didn’t answer I dropped my voice into the male register and asked, “Besides, honey, how badly do you want to know?”

Without a word he thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. “Unless you’ve stopped fucking for money?”

“Of course, I’m still fucking for money, you asshole. What else would I be doing here? But tell me something, sweetie, before we do this deal. What exactly are you trying to buy?”

He became genuinely thoughtful. “Knowledge.”

“Not very specific, dear. Try harder.” He got huffy.

“I just want to be with you again, goddamn it, for one night. You can do whatever the fuck you want.”

“Sold.”

I grinned as I took what he offered. I hadn’t expected this biz tonight, but I wanted something from the bastard and was pleased to think I would get it. Dropping the money into my bag, I took out a chain leash attached to a spiked choke-collar and whipped it around Karl’s neck. Yanking the chain to jab the prongs into his throat without breaking the skin, I dragged him, an incarnation of sputtering rage, through the crowd and down the street to my car.

He sat stiffly in the passenger seat, hands cuffed behind him, leash locked to an eyebolt in the door. It was a quick trip to Karl’s warehouse in west Oakland, but long enough for him to brew one of the unspeaking furies that always fueled our scenes. Leaving Karl cuffed and collared, I got my ropes out of the trunk, then we entered the apartment. Neither of us spoke as I slapped him down to the floor, stripped him, screwed clamps on his nipples, and readied the bondage equipment. I thought of the histories that carried us here.

We met in the Albatross, where Karl tended bar by day and stayed nights to drink his wages, shoot pinball, and spout philosophy like some improbable beat poet. When he drank, he found a voice for the intricate ideas bottled up in his head. He would rant brilliantly until the alcohol slurred his thoughts, then drift into a sullen silence that begged to be broken. I loved to break it, pierce it with clarifying pain. He screamed the loveliest things. I started our little fling mostly male, though my tits were coming in, and hustling was just beginning to seem more challenging than college. He was fresh

from the sea, a working-class boho with a big hungry brain, holding down a day job and sucking up San Francisco counterculture like a thirsty sponge. Kinky went with cutting edge in his understanding of the world, and I was the most temptingly bent thing he'd ever seen. We made a striking couple. Each found in the other the smart sleaze and social mobility we'd looked for. Karl was moving up, I was moving down, and we met on common ground at the Albatross, where my fall from middle-class respectability came under my control. I made it a trick dive, falling with grace and precision.

Now I had the scene laid out. Concrete slab steps climbed the back wall of the apartment to a loft perched fifteen feet above the living area. I anchored a rope to the banister near the top of the staircase, tested its ability to bear weight, then turned my attention to Karl. He sucked air as I tore off the titclamps, but otherwise remained defiantly silent as I put him in a rope harness connected to leather ankle restraints, trussed his legs together, and tied his arms to his sides.

"All right, you motherfuckin' maggot, pay attention. Crawl first; then you're gonna fly."

I backhanded him viciously across the face, then picked up a riding crop with one hand and a switchblade with the other. A sudden torrent of blows from the crop drove him quickly toward the stairs. Karl pushed with his knees and shoulders to climb the steps and evade my aim. The rough concrete tore his skin, and the crop raised stinging welts across his back. At the top step I ordered him to stop. I had tied a rapid-release snap into the rope on the staircase, and I hooked it to his ankle restraints.

"Get up, shithead. And pray I measured right."

With the knife I snagged the underside of his scrotum and lifted, forcing him to rise precariously to his feet. I inched him back against the railing. For one second of perfect terror he balanced on tiptoe, scarlet wetness seeping around the knife point, then he toppled over the banister with a scream. The rope snapped taut and stretched under his weight. I felt the bloodlust rise in me and hurried downstairs. Karl's head swung a foot above the floor. He panted, and panic filled his eyes. The heavy smell of his sweat wrenched open in me hidden reservoirs of hate. Had he really wounded me that much? I lost myself for a while in hurting him: cat, cane, quirt, blade, like old times, his body and mind tight surfaces ripe for laceration. I raved; he surrendered; I burst him and drowned myself in his pain.

Afterward, Karl hung unconscious. Blood stained the ropes, laced his ribs and matted his hair, dripped from his shoulders and nose and pooled brightly on the bare cement floor. I checked his pulse and his breathing, and knew he needed to come down soon. But first I had to catch my breath and remember.

One night, in a playfully bitchy mood, I had tried something new with Karl, told him to kneel before his Goddess. The single malt scotch we'd worked on all night wanted out of my bladder, and my piss was too good for the toilet.

"Strip naked, dog, and open your mouth," I snarled, peeling off my gaff and lifting my skirt. Karl warily obeyed. I took him by the ears and drove his mouth down onto the soft little cock nestled between my slick thighs. He sucked it well back into his throat, and I let loose the kidney-filtered booze. He instantly started to moan and bob. I looked down to see his hand wrapped around his own stiff dick, stroking it frantically. His cum exploded onto my bare legs before I finished peeing, and he fell sobbing to the floor.

Blubbing words and raw emotion poured from him for an hour afterward as he lay curled on the floor, his head cradled in my lap. Only whores had ever done that to him, he cried, whores who pressed their stinking cunts against his face and took his money for spewing out filth, those goddamn fucking bitches. I wasn't like the rest, was I? Didn't my cock make me different? Wasn't I like him? How could I treat him the way women did? How could love be so vile?

Things quickly turned ugly between us, but some kind of sick momentum kept us fucking. One day he mounted me, his weight between my splayed legs pinning my hips to the mattress. His rod began to probe the hole between my cheeks, but it quickly drooped, and he flung himself from me.

"I don't want this anymore," he spat. "You used to be a man who could look like a woman and that was so fine. Very pure. But now you're a woman with a cock and it's all fucked up. I knew that when you pissed on me. That's what made you a woman to me. That's when you really turned into a whore. Women are whores. You're nothing I want. So you just keep fucking away from me."

"All right," I said, "I'll just keep fucking. Away from you."

The next day I rented a room in the Tenderloin and when I came back for my things, I found them in the dumpster where Maya, a college friend I had introduced to Karl, had thrown them. I watched them watch me from the window as I climbed into the cab and drove away. Fuckers. They deserved each other.

I thought that was all in the past, until I saw Karl again. But transsexual rage dies slowly, if ever at all. It's kept alive by every self-deluded prick who buys my time to cloak his homosexual desire with my petticoats, or who craves a woman and can't admit he hates and fears the smell of cunt. It threatens to explode whenever lovers, strangers, friends, or tricks try to make me something that I'm not—just a woman, just a man—or blame me for my dif-

ferences, refuse to see me as a whole person, use me to avoid working out their own bullshit about themselves or the other sex. But as I swim the darkness between the shores of male and female, my rage warms me with its fires at my core. It moves me.

I was through with him. Finally. A weak moan escaped Karl's lips as I clipped a rope to his bound wrists, climbed the stairs behind him, and hauled his arms upward, bending him at the waist. I tied the rope off on the banister before slowly playing out the other line to right him, then lowered him gently to the floor. An hour later his wounds had all been cleaned and dressed, his fluids replenished, my tools put away. I flopped into a chair, and he sat wrapped in a blanket at my feet, absently stroking my legs, nursing a bottle of Gatorade. Neither of us spoke for a long while.

"I asked Maya to, you know," he mumbled, staring into space, "piss. Like that. On me."

"She did?"

"And then she left me."

"Like I 'left you'?"

The irony was lost on him. "Yeah, like you left me."

Another long pause followed, then he asked, "Would you do it to me again?"

"How? As your friend, or as your whore?"

"I don't know yet."

I pushed him onto his back and pulled a gooseneck lamp down to his face so that he saw only the blinding whiteness of electric light. I straddled him, my crotch above his mouth.

Taking my knife from the nearby bag and pressing it against his throat, I hissed, "Move, and I'll rip you up."

He held still and I felt myself let go. Piss strained through the fabric of my underwear, dribbling down on his upturned lips. His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed. What would it mean to him? His eyes remained closed against the harsh light, and his face held no answers. I finished and stood up, turning away to step out of my panties.

"So," he said suddenly, "I still haven't got what I paid for. What I asked you about in the bar."

It was the trick's getting-back-on-top voice, and I knew what it meant. There's a saying in this business: piss tricks can't handle their own trips. Sad but true. Well, that was his choice; now I made mine. I picked up my bag, composed my face in a look of cruel indifference, and wheeled around to face him.

“You can’t let go of your own shit, and I know how to take it out of you. That’s knowledge. You wanted to be with me again, and you were. For a night. You offered me whatever the fuck I wanted, and I took it. I wanted your pain for the pain you once gave me. Sounds like you got exactly what you paid for, Karl. Was it more than you bargained for?”

“But did you cut off your dick yet?!”

“Why does it matter if I have a cock or a cunt? Will knowing that tell you if you’re straight or queer? Good or bad? Clean or dirty? If that’s what you really wanted, you should’ve said so. But that’s information I’m not willing to sell.”

I left Karl wiping his face, still needing to know, wondering why it made a difference, knowing only that it did. There’s another saying in this business: always leave them wanting more. He’d want to see me again. I knew where to find him if I needed the money.

Notes

First published in *Taste of Latex*, no. 8 (1992): 8–11, 46.

Susan Stryker would like to thank Dani Stuchel, Samantha Bounkeua, and Muffy Koster for assistance with manuscript preparation.



THE SURGEON HAUNTS MY DREAMS

1

I'd rather lift my hips to meet His knife as it enters me than lie there unconscious with my legs apart. I'd rather Him see in my open eyes that nothing other than my desire brings Him here. I know it will not be that way, and it scares me to have a need so fierce that I will let myself become completely powerless in the hands of someone I do not completely trust.

2

I can do nothing about the fact that He is a man, and that I must deal with Him. There are no women who do sex-reassignment surgery, not one in all the world. There are no transsexuals who do it, either.

3

Every now and then I slip off into the fantasy of some pussy-loving amazon of a surgeon, a bulldyke doctor who'll turn me outside-in with a welcoming smile.

"It won't be long now, dear," she'll say to me as she drops my balls into the biohazard bin. "Next, let's flay that awkward little dick of yours, and whittle

the erectile tissue down to a reasonable size. We'll tuck it neatly into this new crevice here and dress it in this darling little hood. Your scrotal skin folds up quite delicately, and I've arranged it into such exquisite labia that I'm almost tempted to go down on you myself."

But this woman doesn't exist anywhere other than in my mind—and He is all too real. I know His name, where He works. And I know, too, that He thinks more about how deep and fuckable He can make my cunt than He does about whether I'll be able to feel anything when I rub myself against a slick, wet thigh.

4

This small dark woman's vagina fits around my fist almost as tightly as the latex glove that comes between her flesh and mine. We've drawn a circle of admirers around the waterbed at the party, who watch her writhe gracefully at the end of my dancing forearm. It's the first day of her period and she's bleeding so dramatically. Her blood runs down my forearm and drips onto the plastic sheet; I should have worn latex up to my elbow, and not just to my wrist.

The thought occurs to me that I'll bleed just once—for Him—and then no more. Will He squander the sight of it?

5

The coals in the fireplace at the end of my lover's bed glow red in the warm darkness. Before we lie naked together for the rest of the night, I pause for a moment in shy self-consciousness to push my genitals away behind me, back between my legs. When I wrap my arms around her and snuggle close, I want the curve of her ass to caress my bush—and nothing else.

The deep purple cane marks across her butt cheeks seem to radiate as much heat to the surface of my skin as the fireplace across the room does. My tits are still so tender from her clamps that it's almost too much sensation to bear when the tiniest rotation of shoulders or hips drags my nipple against the edge of a whip-welt on her back.

Her breathing is regular and relaxed now. I open my eyes and look past her to see Him watching us through the window. He scribbles His observations in a notebook, then looks in the mirror behind me to see my penis lying soft and warm against the back of my thigh. I smile at Him and He smiles back. We both know I'll give my penis to no one else but Him.

I listen to the click of my heels on the sidewalk, feel the hem of the short tight dress and the stockings on my freshly shaved legs, smell the delicate scent of my perfume. I usually wear jeans and T-shirts, but today I'm dressing for Him. On the way to His office, I stop and look at my reflection in a store window. I look at the make-up. I look at the hair. No, I confess, this isn't all for Him. Femme can be fun when you feel like it, sexy when it catches a woman's attention, subversive when it turns back the straight gaze, powerful when it gets you what you want.

I sit in the chair in front of His desk and pretend to listen as He moves His lips. I cross and uncross my legs. I smile at Him. If He thinks I'm the girl He wants me to be, I'm sure I'll get what I want. He tells me once more how much it will cost, and I give Him the cashiers' check. We make a date.

"Just remember," He says with a wink, "I get to use it first."

I laugh politely before I leave. How come I feel like I just turned a trick when He's the one who kept the money?

I'm alone in the bathtub, fucking my asshole with the two middle fingers of my left hand. My left thumb circles the spot I think of as my clit. While I work that bit of gristle against my pubic bone, my breasts sway gently in water set in motion by the movement of my hand.

For the first time since becoming a woman I feel the stirrings of an erection. The hormones make this almost impossible, but here alone, where my body does not have to be a social body, I coax the sensation along. It feels uncanny, deeply familiar and utterly strange all at the same time. I'd like to be able to touch myself anywhere and find a special pleasure there, but that ability eludes me here at this conflicted site. I don't know what to do with this thing that rises up to vex me. How can I love that which defies my ability to define myself?

I take the matter firmly in hand and struggle with it, vainly invoking different names to change its shape, but it resists all transformation. Materiality always resists the symbolic frame. I beg it, then, to throw all language off and become ungendered flesh, but language clenches this meat between its teeth in a death-grip. Words and things together taunt me. Though each downward stroke of my right hand tries to push them apart, they refuse to be

unjoined. I know that I will find my pleasure in the pursuit of their estrangement, or I will not find it anywhere at all.

Finally, in my need, I call out for Him to help me. The bolted bathroom door slams open and He looks down upon me.

“You shouldn’t have to think so much,” He says. There is more cruelty in His voice than I have noticed before; there is a trace of threatened malice when He says, “Just lie there with your legs apart and I’ll straighten out this mess.”

He scares me, but I’m ready. I’ve been waiting for Him so long now. As He falls upon me, I see the knife glinting in His hand, and I know this water will soon be turning red. When I lift my hips to meet Him as He enters me, He will surely see that nothing other than my desire brings Him here.

Note

First published as “Preoperative,” *TNT: Transsexual News Telegraph* (Spring 1996): 21–22. This piece was originally performed at The Illustrated Woman: The Second Annual Conference on Feminist Activism in the Arts, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California, February 1994.



RENAISSANCE AND APOCALYPSE

Notes on the Bay Area's Transsexual Arts Scene

Dishing Up San Francisco's Transsexual Arts Scene

For those of you who don't get out much, I want to make the following public service announcement: transsexual art, literature, and attitude are the hottest things to pop out of the San Francisco's underground since Modern Primitivism entered the mainstream.

Pick up any funky-cool queerzine (like the most recent *Brat Attack*, for instance), and you're likely to find some friendly neighborhood transsexual pontificating about the complexity of fin-de-siècle identity. On a glossier note, the next issue of *Deneuve*—San Francisco's slick, high-profile lesbo mag—will include a story on dyke-identified MTFs that features a couple of Bay Area homegirls. Local gender talent has been providing a lot of grist for the straight national media mill, too. The *New Yorker* (yep, swankier-than-thou *New Yorker*) is doing a piece scheduled for mid-July on female-to-male transsexuality that relies heavily on a few of the guys you're likely to bump into at the local FTM group. *Mother Jones* ran an article on transsexuality back in May based on Bay Area writer Richard Levine's forays into our community (and a book by him is in the works). Closer to home, the June 15 issue of the *Guardian* featured a story on the transgender liberation movement that quoted several Bay Area gender activists. It's not just schlock TV for us transies anymore.

This burst of media attention represents something more than the fact that transgenderism has become a chichi topic in fields as disparate as high fashion and academe. Increasingly, transsexuals are speaking for themselves about their own experiences, interpreting the world from their own perspectives—and nontranssexuals are listening.

A burgeoning number of local transsexual writers, artists, activists, and intellectuals are beginning to make their marks in the broader Bay Area culture—and beyond. Hard-working MTF playwright Kate Bornstein has finally hit the big-time with her latest one-woman show, *Virtually Yours*. The multimedia performance piece played to packed houses on two coasts in the spring of '94, and her new genre-busting book, *Gender Outlaw*, has men, women, and the rest of us eagerly turning pages all across the country. The ambiguously gendered (but obviously altered) body of California Academy of the Arts's Jill St. Jacques took the stage several months ago during the San Francisco run of the transgender technodrama *Umbilical Thom*. Meanwhile, at 848 Community Art Space on Divisadero, local FTM playwright David Harrison staged a trial run of his promising work-in-progress, the appropriately titled *FTM*. Also at 848, *FTM* photographer Loren Cameron presented his tour-de-force exhibit, *Our Vision, Our Voices: Transsexual Portraits and Nudes*. All the critics raved about it; the opening night crowd was so huge some people waited hours outside the door for their chance to get in—and inquiring minds have learned that Cameron is pursuing a book project based on his work.

Last summer another exhibit featuring transgender photographs and prose by transsexual subjects, *Crossing the Line*, opened at the now-defunct ARU Gallery on the Duboce Triangle before moving to Red Dora's Bearded Lady Cafe, the hippest boy-tolerant dyke hang-out in the known universe. Red Dora's also hosted a night of readings last August, *Over and Out: Dispatches from the Gender Front* by Openly Transsexual People. T-type performers appear regularly in the café/art space's cutting-edge cabaret shows, thanks largely to the trans-positive attitude of impresario extraordinaire Kris Kovic.

There's more. Sultry TS torch singer Veronica Klaus pulls in big crowds at Bay Area nightclubs with her blues and soul revue. Pop the right video by stylish German film-maker Monika Treut into your VCR and you just might find yourself staring at FTM poster boy Max Wolf. Marin County native Hank Rubin was the subject of *Trans*, a short film by Sophie Constantinou that premiered at the 1994 San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. I even made a few waves myself at the Illustrated Woman conference at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts this past February, when I read a short

piece of experimental prose about how a sex-change surgeon insinuates himself into all of a preoperative transsexual lesbian's erotic relationships with other women.

The list could go on. Just about any literary-minded transsexual you meet these days has notes for a novel stuffed in his/her back pocket. FTM community leader Jamison Green is currently looking for a publisher for his autobiography, while MTF Christine Beatty recently self-published her collection of sex-worker short stories and poems, *Misery Loves Company*. On July 20 at Kimo's, globe-trotting transsexual activist Anne Ogborn screened roughly edited video footage of her recent stay in a Hijra community in India, which we can only hope will reappear in a more polished form in the near future. Finally, newcomer Philippa Garner is definitely a womanoid to watch out for. In a previous incarnation she landed on the *Tonight Show* with her whimsical spoofs of American consumer culture; now that she's settling into this trans thing, we shouldn't be surprised to see something delightful from her soon.

A Renaissance?

Modern transsexual surgical techniques have been around at least since 1931. Most people have known about transsexuality since Christine Jorgensen grabbed headlines with her sex-change back in 1952. Gender clinics at major universities have been riding herd on the transsexual population since the late '60s. Oprah, Geraldo, Phil, Joan, Sally, Montel, and the rest of the talkie-tabloid pack have been functioning like a well-oiled transsexual PR machine since the mid-'80s. The numbers of transsexuals have been steadily increasing for decades. So why all this hullabaloo now?

Having spent way too many years in grad school studying American history, I start to salivate at the slightest suggestion of a long-term, multicausal explanation for anything, and have learned to draw pointed analogies between any two seemingly unrelated cultural phenomena. But such Pavlovian behaviors actually seem appropriate at this moment. Part of the answer to the question I posed above lies in everything described in the preceding paragraph—the current explosion of artistic expression is directly related to the growth, maturity, and historical development of transsexual identities and communities.

Some people in most cultures around the world and in all periods of history have “changed sex,” sometimes physically altering their genitals. But transsexual surgery and hormones are unique to the twentieth century: transsexuality is a novel, historically specific way to assert an identity con-

trary to the one we were handed at birth. Since the practice is so distinctive, it's taken awhile for a critical mass of transsexual people to build, for transsexuals to get to know one another and start building social networks as well as start recovering our history. It's taken a while for us to begin to understand the relationship of this new identity—the transsexual—to the rest of human culture and to lay the groundwork for political mobilization. It's taken awhile to find our voices in the public arena. We are just beginning to grasp the implications of the fact that we have experiences without parallels among other kinds of people—and to insist that these differences are not best understood by labeling them a sickness. We are just now discovering transsexual pride and starting to make it self-conscious and based on our situation in the world.

This all reminds me of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and '30s. After the Civil War, most of the former slaves stayed put for a few years, too poor to go elsewhere and cautiously optimistic about the prospect of achieving racial equality in a "reconstructed" South. By the late 1870s, that prospect had failed to materialize, and African Americans began leaving for the North in numbers so vast that the movement is still known as the Great Migration. It demographically transformed the old industrial cities of the Northeast, where Southern Blacks went in search of jobs. By the early twentieth century the New York City neighborhood of Harlem had become the cultural capital of African America.

Harlem in the '20s and '30s was full of young Black people whose parents had never been slaves—they had a new kind of American identity. Harlem was smack in the middle of one of the most cosmopolitan places on earth, and the people who lived there were constantly exposed to an endless variety of stimulating cultural cross-fertilizations. More importantly, Black artists, musicians, and writers began to express their understanding of their own particular experiences in a manner that succeeded both in terms of the dominant white American culture and according to their own cultural aesthetics. They had hand-me-down stories of oppression and resistance, fragments of African memory, a rich legacy of song, the multifaceted lived experiences of racial discrimination. From them, they fashioned a literature, a new kind of music, new ways of interpreting the world through dance or painting that altered the very meaning of literature, music, and art up until that point in time.

I have to wonder: Will there be a transsexual equivalent of jazz? Can we see its dim outlines today in the streets of San Francisco? Are we feeling the birth pangs of a Transsexual Renaissance?

Slave Narratives and Transsexual Autobiography

African American literature is built upon the bedrock of the classic slave narrative, which recounts the paradigm of a uniquely African American historical experience. It begins with African freedom, includes a “middle passage” of enslavement, and culminates in a new kind of freedom after slavery. The middle passage is crucial. It is transformative; it is what separates African Americans from Africans as well as from other Americans, even while it links them inextricably with both. The middle passage is occupied by no one other than the African Americans themselves. The legacy of that occupation is part of the meaning of African American identity, but it is not the entire definition. And African American literature is more than an artistic reaction against the history of slavery; it is a powerful demonstration that the fullness of one’s human experience cannot be mastered by an outside force.

Like the slave narrative, the classic transsexual autobiographical narrative has three parts: an account of pre-transitional feelings about identity, the “middle passage” of transition, and post-transitional life experiences in a new gender. And as in the slave narrative, the transsexual middle passage is the part of the story that makes it uniquely our own. Whatever myth of origins we graft that experience onto, whatever plot line we follow into the unknown future, the transition from one sex to another is the single experience that no one other than transsexuals will ever have. Having that experience makes you one of us.

The transsexual autobiographical narrative is the bedrock of our future literature, the map of our past. Almost every one of us has had to sit down with a psychological evaluation questionnaire and seriously address some version of the question, “How did you develop your sense of gender identity? Please give a brief personal statement.” The very fact of our medical colonization incidentally produces a composite record of our lives. How many tens of thousands of these sketches have now been written? How many more stories are buried in case studies and other medical or psychological treatises? A handful of our autobiographies have been published, but where is the vast bulk of the raw documentary material of our culture? How are we ever to grasp the rich diversity of transsexual human experience that is our legacy if we cannot learn about the lives of our brothers and sisters?

We need to think hard, individually and collectively, about the meaning of our transitions, and ask if the stories we use to explain that life-passage are sufficient to voice the complexities of what we have experienced. Why is it that we are content to answer the questions others put to us rather than de-

vises a story of our own? Perhaps, like Africans Americanized through slavery, we must define ourselves partly by claiming the full content of our historical experience and partly by opposing the narrative that has been imposed upon our flesh. The tale of gender dysphoria and its cure is the medical/psychiatric narrative of transsexuality. Must it also be our own? If we stop asking non-transsexuals to explain our lives and emotions to us, can we fashion the phenomenology of our experience into a radically different account of who we are, where we've been, where we're going?

We need to get beyond thinking of our desires and self-perceptions as the symptoms of a mental disorder and start thinking of them as the raw material for a new story about transsexual identity. We need to stop sanding away the rough edges of attitudes, moods, styles, opinions, and responses that don't fit somebody else's interpretation of what our lives are about. We need to become a confederate band of starry-eyed yarn-spinners. We're ripe for a Transsexual Renaissance.

**Apocalypse: Fragment of a Work in Progress
to Be Completed by the Reader**

I have a dream that is older than heaven, keener than wisdom, more pointed than a sword of vengeance.

Seven trumpets sound; seven seals are broken, and we the shapechangers unbind our masks. We step from our prisonstriped bodysuits to launch our bioplasm against the locked drawers of psychotherapists' file cabinets. We seep through the cracks and ingest every transsexual client's file, taking upon our communal selves their every written word as the skin of our own new flesh. We leach every syllable of whispered confession from the office wallpaper and reabsorb it into our mass. We flee on a thousand legs into the desert and dance, rubbing our dung into each letter on the surface of our corporate form until we transmute into shimmering gold. We expand, our ruptured exoskeleton spilling jewels and diadems across the hot sand. We glisten in the searing sunlight, blinding all who dare approach us.

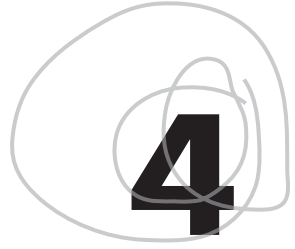
On the second day of the Anarcorporeal Dispensation we reconvene as myriad individual mammals. In this mode we maximize our spatio-political efficacy and gain control of certain areas between, as well as within, our bodies. We surround and besiege all gender clinics, psychiatric hospitals, and surgical centers. During our encampment we feast on autocastrated testicles, and warm ourselves at night with the burning fat of amputated breasts. In passing through the gate of carnal transit, we have shed the primal fear of me-

atification and now comprehend the full range of embodiment's usefulness. We are more resourceful than the monomorphs who would bury us in their static image. They abandon their citadels in confusion, and we gaily bedeck ourselves in the costumes of their cast-off uniforms. We take up their sober workthings as the ecstatic tools of our play.

The paired principles of homosemblance and xenogenesis shall henceforth govern the consolidation of our fluidflesh until the Chronoterminal Decree. We now disappear and reappear at will among the ankylotic ones. We shall repeat with fond attention any form that gives us pleasure, taking delight in shapeliness itself and vanishing into identity with that which we adore. Likewise, shall we unharness content from its material constraints. We shall become a menagerie bursting suddenly into sight to stop traffic on a whim with any nightmare-mocking guise. Having thus fully accomplished the twin ideals of incorporation, we announce the evening of the last day in a machine language to the bloody-throated multitudes. We shall plunge our animal tongues like justice against the barestripped bosombones of the people. The blessed plastiphiles shall receive our lips like honeywine, while all others shall be cast out—broken mirrors, swept without reflection into darkness.

Note

First published in *TNT: Transsexual News Telegraph* (Summer 1994): 14–17.



ACROSS THE BORDER

On the Anarchorporeality Project

A DISCUSSION BETWEEN KATHY HIGH
AND SUSAN STRYKER

Dear Kathy:

It was great to talk to you the other day. I'm really looking forward to working with you.

I've enclosed several items to give you a sense of what I've been up to for the last year or so of my life . . .

Project Overview

The way I envision what I've tentatively labeled the Anarchorporeality Project is as a series of transsexual surgical operations performed upon me and documented/interpreted in various media by other artists as well as by myself. I intend to accomplish several goals in undertaking this project.

The first is simply to chart the contours of contemporary transsexual experience from a transsexual perspective. Not only do I want to record the surgical procedures that most nontranssexual fixate on, I want to document the bureaucratic process of actually getting access to surgery to show how the current medical system imposes some tough choices on transsexuals about how we exercise power over our own bodies.

Second, I want this to be overtly political work—not in the sense of being didactic or moralizing, but at a more sophisticated level. Transsexuality is of-

ficially pathologized the way homosexuality was officially pathologized until 1973, and I see the project I'm undertaking as part of a broader effort to alter public perceptions of transsexuality as well as to dismantle the oppressive legal, medical, and psychiatric regime that currently regulates transsexuality. I feel this is important work not just for my own special interests but because it involves a critique of a biomedical establishment that operates coercively on most people.

The deep rationale for undertaking this project is to shift the grounds on which a transsexual project justifies itself. I've chosen to do gender politics in the arts field because I see in body performance artwork a set of precedents that can be harnessed to my broader purposes. I want to see exactly how far I can push a claim—that I'm changing the shape of my genitals and secondary sex characteristics for aesthetic and artistic reasons, not because I am eligible to receive a *DSM-III-R* diagnosis of 302.5(c) gender identity disorder. I consider making a viable claim for transsexual body art to be a major step toward depathologization.

In a forthcoming essay on the photography of FTM transsexual Loren Cameron, I suggest that

transsexuality itself increasingly needs to be considered an art form. The more we pry body-alteration technologies away from their pathologizing rationales, and the more we divorce them from futile attempts to shore up the bankrupt notion of a "true sex," the more the decision to reconfigure one's flesh relies on purely aesthetic criteria. "What's your pleasure?" rather than "What's your gender?" could well become the operant question for transsexuals in the rapidly approaching twenty-first century.

This suggests that "transsexuality" as we know it could easily become a relic of the twentieth century, a label designed to incarcerate and stigmatize the transformational potential of all human identity, as well as the capacity for its technologization. This is not to say that genital reconstruction and other surgical techniques will disappear in some imagined future of proliferated possibilities for meaningful expressions of identity; desire cannot be so easily detached from the form of one's flesh. That is why the political struggle currently being waged by the population consolidated under the transsexual sign—the so-called transgender liberation movement—is so crucial. It is but one of the initial cultural arenas in which the ability to practice consent over the technological means of our own embodiment is being fought for. Of

course, pursuing this project means actually doing work of artistic and critical merit, but I am capable of that, at least as a writer and conceptualist. My lack of skill in other media is the primary motivation for wanting to collaborate with other artists. At the very least, photography, film, and video would play an important part in documenting the project's unrepeatable work in the medium of living human flesh; I imagine, however, that visual arts could play a much larger interpretive role.

Transsexuality (to my way of thinking about it) is intricately bound up with the manifestation of gender in the visual realm. Visualization and gender identification are in fact explicitly inked in several psychoanalytic theories—the gendered subject is consolidated through recognition of its projected mirror image. Through its disarticulation and redistribution of the constitutive elements of gender, transsexuality offers an opportunity to witness the temporality of this gender construction, while the visual arts—especially film and video—supply a means to investigate gender's temporal performativity through the representation and manipulation of gender's spatial display.

The project that I've envisioned would necessarily entail a critique of some contemporary body artwork that uses plastic surgery, especially that of Orlan (and especially since she is the person whose project most resembles what I propose and the person to whom I have been most pointedly compared). I want to show how the kinds of fleshly alterations Orlan undertakes uphold rather than undermine dominant standards of embodiment—she is not contesting the regulation of the most heavily policed regions of the body. My project would allow me to do precisely that.

Finally, I find the conceptual and intellectual terrain my project ventures into fascinating in its own right—the intersection of gender, sexuality, feminist politics, biomedical technology, and media. This is a terrain we all live in and contend with, and I would look forward to contributing something novel and provocative to the cultural discourses on these issues.

Stage One

The initial part of the project is, to put it as bluntly as possible, for me to cut my balls off, and to make a short film about the process that explores the issues surrounding the procedure.

Castration alone is not a routine part of male-to-female transsexual surgery for most middle-class white transsexuals; most surgeons prefer to do the orchidectomy (or orchiectomy, as it is sometimes called) at the same time they

do the genital reconstruction. It is more common among transsexuals from lower socioeconomic positions because it is a relatively simple and cheap body-alteration technique that can be fairly readily obtained. Castration is also medically advised upon occasion, primarily because removal of the testes permits the administration of lower doses of estrogens (which can cause liver damage and other adverse effects after prolonged high-dosage use). I'm interested in exploring the class issues around the procedure—poorer people must often content themselves with a bodily “disfigurement” that the middle-class can afford to renaturalize and erase.

I'm also interested in looking at geography and the physical location of the body, which are always pertinent issues in the cultural construction of identities. Location profoundly affects the points at which one exercises choice about one's body, and where one loses it. In the United States, castration requires a psychiatric approval letter, a three-month waiting period, and costs upward of \$3,500—but the medical care is generally quite good. There is an unlicensed clinic in Tijuana that will do castration on demand for a thousand dollars—but the quality of care is considerably less. There is also an underground circulation of pornographic home movies of castrations and thus an underground knowledge of how to do castrations outside of (or covertly within) medical settings. I want to examine the trade-offs involved in these three different routes to castration and the kinds of “border-crossings” they entail.

I would be interested, as well, in investigating the differences between acts and identities. Historically and cross-culturally, the act of castration has been associated with several different identities—the Hijra, the Galli, eunuchs, and the castrati, to name a few. What is the relationship between these historically and culturally specific identities and the late twentieth-century Western European male-to-female transsexual? What is the difference between a man castrating himself and a preoperative MTF transsexual castrating herself? What are the implications of any answers I come up with for current theorizing about the Foucauldian distinction between acts and identities in the history of sexuality?

Finally, I would be interested in the theoretical—especially poststructuralist feminist psychoanalytic—aspects of castration and its role in the formation of the gendered subject. On the one hand, “castration” functions metaphorically as the definitive gesture of consolidating a feminine subject position in the signifying economy. On the other hand, physical castration is the only surgical manipulation I can think of practiced by MTF transsex-

uals that deforms (rather than reconsolidates) a dominant morphology of the body—that is, transsexual surgeries are about making part of one kind of body look like a part of another kind of body rather than simply breaking a form. Theorizing from the situation of the castrated MTF transsexual body would provide an uncommon vantage point from which to examine some of the most hotly contested problems in critical theory, feminism, and cultural studies about the relationships between sex and gender, body and identity.

Practical Considerations

The bare bones of the matter is that I want to have somebody film me being castrated. How all the issues I've outlined above get addressed are open for discussion. Perhaps they, too, will be part of the film; perhaps they will be addressed in other media—lecture, photography, panel discussion, whatever. I've talked to the surgeon in Tijuana, who is fine with us doing photography/video during the procedure. I've also begun investigating the possibility of getting the surgery locally (as well as cheaply and clandestinely), through some contacts I have in the s/m community. I also have contact information for surgeons in the Bay Area and Los Angeles who require psychiatric recommendations. I do have my official diagnosis letter proclaiming me a bona fide transsexual and know psychotherapists who would write the surgery letter. If all goes well, I'd like to do the surgery in early 1995.

On the noncorporeal front, I have a public lecture scheduled for November 16, 1994, at the Art Institute of Chicago to discuss this project and am currently working on a proposal for a performance/presentation at The Lab in San Francisco for the 1995–96 season. I am also beginning to write grants and explore other means of funding the project. Finally, I am contacting other artists with whom I can collaborate.

I hope you're interested in what I've outlined above. Please let me know what you think. Feel free to use any of the material I've sent, including this letter, in any way you think might further the project.

Looking forward to seeing you in the not too distant future, and talking again before that,

Sincerely,

Susan Stryker

October 26, 1994

Dear Susan,

It was good to hear from you and to hear about this project. It brings up a lot of issues for me. I will try to explain what I am thinking about it and also how I am envisioning this project.

As I was pondering the identity of a MTF transsexual and what that actually means to me, I ran across this citation in an article by Judith Butler where she talks about the relationship of gayness to straightness:

"Imitation does not copy that which is prior but produces and inverts the very terms of priority and derivativeness. Hence, if gay identities are implicated in heterosexuality, that is not the same as claiming that they are determined or derived from heterosexuality, that is not the same as claiming that heterosexuality is the only cultural network in which they are implicated. These are, quite literally, inverted imitations, ones which invert the order of imitated and imitation, and which, in the process, expose the fundamental dependency of 'the origin' on that which it claims to produce as its secondary effect."¹

Although this quote deals with the areas of hetero/homosexualities, and does not touch upon transsexual issues, I found it useful. I acknowledge the invisibility of transsexuality within many homosexual/bisexual contexts and am wary of the dissing and othering of transsexuals and their preferences. But, for me, the subversive/inversive relationship between straight and gay in looking at cultural definitions of identity was useful in clarifying gender and transsexuality. So, please allow me to refer to Butler here.

Rather than an imitation of "womanness," perhaps another interpretation of woman is being produced with MTF transsexuality. Perhaps transsexuality is an inversion of the natural parts, a redoing of nature per se. What does it mean to "perform" as a woman in this culture, anyway? In your transsexual womanness I see your development of a new woman, an inverted woman. The "monster," which some may consider being created here, is much more a hybrid, a synthesis of the essence of dualisms: nature and culture perhaps. But if we step outside of those binary situatings and consider the overlaps, the combinations, as essential, I can begin to see your interpretation and mine as charged and rich for exchange. As you quote in your letter: "'What's your pleasure?' rather

than “What’s your gender?”” But also, “What’s your pleasure?” rather than “What’s your pathology?”

I am excited about doing this project with you because it challenges me as a maker and a viewer as well. I have wanted to propose working together since we met at The Illustrated Woman conference last February. The investigation around gender and medical technologies needs to include a discussion of transsexuality. There are so few videos that look at the topic of transsexuality in a way to include recordings of MTF operations. This video could be an important inclusion in an ongoing dialogue about both transgender issues and the discourse of medical technologies or the critique of technological determinism and hierarchies. I believe your participation in this project is to define the political groundwork of the theory of gendering and transsexuality, and mine is to determine the use of the video, the politics of the “handling” of the pictures, and the choices inherent to the medium.

I have to admit I am experiencing a fair amount of resistance to the idea of taping your castration operation. I don’t believe what I am experiencing is resistance to your change or to the fact that you are a male-to-female transsexual. This is something I am wary of and have thought about a lot. As you have said: “The attribution of unnatural monstrosity remains a palpable characteristic in most lesbian and gay representations of transsexuality, displaying in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism. Because transsexuality in particular represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends, people who have invested their aspirations for social justice in identitarian movements say things about us out of sheer panic that, if said of other minorities, would see print only in the most-riddled, white supremacist, Christian fascist rags.”²

But I believe my resistance is toward the act of cutting to alter your body. I have resistance to cutting in general (I have never had surgery and have gone to great lengths to *avoid* having it). And maybe it is the fact that you are choosing to cut off your *balls* that presents a problem for me. (And the notion of cutting off the “penis” is so closely married with the notion of castration especially in psychoanalytic associations that I tend to trip up on it all the time.) So, if that is the source of my resistance, am I ultimately resisting your choice and your change in

gender identity? I can't separate it right now. Is it the *cut* or *what* is being cut? Why am I focused on this aspect? (I suspect my reactions are typical of those of a nontranssexual.) This I must examine some more with your help.

I don't see this resistance as an overwhelming problem. I think that my resistance can be used to our advantage in the tape. I suspect that other people who come to this tape will be experiencing similar resistance, and if we can successfully explore this area, we can present a shift from a judgmental viewing to one that remains open. "Just as the words 'dyke,' 'fag,' 'queer,' 'slut,' and 'whore' have been reclaimed, respectively, by lesbians and gay men, by anti-assimilationist sexual minorities, by women who pursue erotic pleasure, and by sex industry workers, words like 'creature,' 'monster,' and 'unnatural' need to be reclaimed by the transgendered."³ I would like to work with you in your "transgender rage" to make a tape that will positively call attention to transsexuality, to make that which is presently invisible much more visible.

This notion of "heroic doctors still endeavor[ing] to triumph over nature" is intriguing to me. This notion of medical science conquering the body, mapping and charting its terrain, is a history I am familiar with critiquing. But this instance gives different possibilities. Where did this surgical practice come from? When and where was it practiced first? References to the history of transsexual surgery would be useful to include in this tape to give a context to the medical establishment's control over the genderization of the body as well as its reproductive capacities and so-called "well being."

If we do go the Tijuana route, I would like to consider the possibility of talking to the doctor before (or after) you have the surgery performed. I would like to discuss with him why he is involved in this kind of work: for the money, because of the fall-off of US clients who are, like you, skirting the regulations of the system; or is there a particular research he is interested in around genital surgery? Or perhaps there is a politic behind his practice that engages with the transsexual experience. Perhaps he only deals with a certain class of people and is committed to that socialist practice?

The surgery itself is the most challenging to consider shooting because, surgery in general is difficult to watch. I think it is a political act to show this surgery in this context. But how to present it to depathologize it, without spectacle, without sheer sensationalism sending the audience into fits of convulsions? This is my question. It seems a de-

finitive act, but ultimately it is really only one part of the entire process for you. So, that bigger process must also be shown as well as this “act.” I propose that I come to visit San Francisco and that we spend some time together. Perhaps we can map out some other ways to trace this history from your psychological involvement in your girlfriend’s birthing, through the decision for your surgeries, and beyond.

To be successful, I would like to see this tape move people to understand how you have become involved in the pleasure side of the issue rather than simply the gendering. Rather than depict you “at war with nature,” I would like to have you claim your gender, “constituting yourself on your own terms.”⁴

I am not so concerned about shooting the surgery for myself. I know what happens to me as I shoot—I distance myself through the lens and worry about banal details like keeping things in focus and composition of the frame. Also, my viewfinder is black and white, so I will be further distanced from the color of the blood, etc. But many questions remain: How to shoot this surgery? Do we want a spectacle? Should I shoot it as a dance where I circle the surgeon and you on the table; or as a detailed microscopic shot with the lens in macro-focus; or as a unmovable still tripod shot with medium framing? What does each framing and movement within the frame suggest? How will it further distance the audience or include them in this process? Do we want them to “feel” pain, to experience nausea and discomfort? Or to be a witness and a collaborator, aligned with you, or the surgeon, or surgical assistant?

Lately, I have been really worried about the preponderance of cop shows on TV. What concerns me mostly is the identification of the camera with the cops themselves. The audience begins to adopt the position of the authority themselves, the viewer policing with the police. This psychology I would like to try and subvert and use to our advantage. I would like to identify the surgery not as an invasion, a mutation, but as an extension of your power and a transformation, much like the birth of a baby transformed from its inside world to the exterior with such force that it must be agile to survive. I want to demonstrate your agility and your survival.

To be continued and continued. When shall we get together to work some of this all out? Look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,
Kathy High

Notes

First published in *Felix: A Journal of Media Arts and Communication* 2, no. 1 (1995): 228–36.

- 1 Butler, “Decking Out,” 22.
- 2 Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein.”
- 3 Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein.”
- 4 Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein.”



LOS ANGELES AT NIGHT

The sky's as dark as it ever gets in Los Angeles at night. His feet are spread apart, ankle restraints fastened around his biker boots and chained to the railing of the redwood deck behind the house in Silverlake I've borrowed for the weekend from a friend. He's leaning forward against the rail on his forearms, hooded, half naked, a big broad-shouldered guy with thick hairy legs but a smooth backside and clean-shaven head. The black cotton T-shirt advertising some gay leather bar is hiked up around his armpits so he can expose more target area but shyly cover the fresh scars, still too raw to show, from his mastectomies.

Trees to either side of the deck screen the neighbors' views of us, while the Ice-T tracks booming on the stereo drown out all other noise. I stand there idly puffing one of his cigarettes, holding a heavy flogger loosely in my left hand and watching his body sway absentmindedly in time with the music. I'm wearing serious play clothes—leather pants and black Docs. My shirt's off because the night's warm and I've worked up a sweat; I enjoy feeling the trickle of moisture running between my breasts. I like the pungent smell of me and the sight of him.

Beyond him I can see the fabulous City of Angels spreading out in every direction, enveloping us, creeping up hillsides encrusted with overlit houses, disappearing into the dull orange glow of early summer haze. Downtown of-

fice towers peek from behind the silhouetted palm trees and low-rise buildings that punctuate the broken horizon. I pan the city: a police helicopter hovers in the middle distance, the spotlight tracing search patterns on the ground below. He's still so lost in sensation it would be pointless to hit him again right now.

I enjoy these quiet moments in the middle of heavy scenes, when a partner's physical limits offer a contemplative respite from the concentration required for a methodical whipping. My nipples are hard, but I'm turned outward at the moment and don't really want to focus on my own sensations. I feed one nipple a short sharp twist to appease its distracting hunger and feel a jolt of electricity shoot down to my crotch.

Pleasure's never a simple thing. It always makes me stop and think—a habit that eventually gets me in trouble with tricks and lovers. As my hand returns to my breast, I pause to consider a formal question: is the link I've made so effortlessly between nipple and crotch anything other than the violent installation of a fantasy that organizes sensation for a reproductive economy? These breasts were artificially induced at a point well into my adulthood. They're prosthetic extensions of a will to translate transsexual identifications into interactions with others, generators of material effects that sustain a desired remapping of corporealized space. They have nothing to do with the physiology of milk, birth, crotch. What then is this genital-mammary connection I've made for myself if not a dream of natural womanhood carved upon my unnatural flesh? Is it the fantasy of coerced unity that arouses me, the dream of conquering unruly embodiment with an imaginary idea? Maybe it's hopelessly nostalgic, but I find pleasure in the fact that he and I can cite the forms of those fictively unified political aggregations we call “man” and “woman” even as we work to consign their current configurations to history. I take in the sweeping vistas of the city and tweak my nipple again. Fuck theory.

I return my attention to my trick's flanks and buttocks, visually slicing him into parts that matter in the moment. I can't help but dwell on the difference between my distant visual enjoyment of the scene and the overwhelming phenomenological intensities that so recently played themselves out across his skin. I have been in his position before, when the point of subjective presence flees inward from the surface with such force that it breaks down and breaks through to another space and time. Remembering such psychic implosions, desiring that sense of release and transformation for myself, trying to open him up and connect with him, I find myself wanting to literalize the experience of breakthrough. I want to cut him and turn a metaphor into something real.

Transsexuals have such emotionally loaded relations with surgical instruments. Triumph and pain, visibility and erasure, self-determination and inscription by others wrestle fitfully along the scalpel's edge. Sometimes it feels so good to take the blade firmly in your own hand.

I retrieve alcohol, latex gloves, and scalpel from the med kit waiting in the wings of the scene and begin carving a new erotogenic zone of shallow incisions along his rib cage. As if the cuts promise some fresh new avenue of escape, he returns from his inward mental journey to reencounter the volatile wonder of his own skin. The surface is lumpy, knotted with hardened lymph and discolored by subcutaneous blood. His neurons still fire frantically, relaying wild information about the energy transferred from the supple leather of my whip.

He cries out. I know this sensation too, as the painless pressure of steel slicing through flesh gives way to sting and burn. I douse his wounds with alcohol then flick open a lighter. The spark produces a magic moment of flesh and flames and blood, an abject, sacred conflagration of contraries that lasts a fleeting instant. I smother the burning alcohol quickly and watch him writhe. Fire at night is always a thing of terrible beauty. I wonder if he experiences cutting the way I usually do. Being cut forces me to confront the inescapability of my embodiment. It validates my decision to change shape as my means of continuing to live as an embodied subject, forbids me to deny the pain of the body's necessary failures, rewards me with the body's accomplishments. Cutting reminds me that I am always meat first.

He's back now, summoned to full presence by the fire and the knife like some familiar spirit. He laughs raggedly and blows air heavily through his mouth. He sighs and groans, shrugs excess energy off his shoulders, and shakes it from his fingertips before adjusting his stance. He reaches a hand to his side to smear it in blood, then settles back down with forearms flat against the railing as I start the whip swirling again in lazy figure eights. He sticks his fingers through the hood's mouth hole one by one, licking them clean, body still swaying slightly. I time the whip's circuit to the tempo of his movements and the bass line of the music, catching his ass on alternating sides with each downbeat. We haven't spoken, or needed to, for at least an hour. I'm beginning to tire, though, and decide this will be the cool-down set before we quit. I tell him so, then slow-dance the cat languidly across his haunches and let my thoughts drift.

We'd met several months earlier at some insane cocktail reception in a city neither of us called home. He was standing alone, looking out of place in the hotel lobby next to a potted fern, one hand shoved into the pocket of his tweed slacks and the other wrapped around a bourbon and water. He wasn't living as a man yet, but the combination of oxford shirt, tie, and sports coat

with his platinum blond flattop and facial piercings gave him a faggish sort of flair. The way he cross-cut different styles of masculinity somehow communicated the aesthetic sensibility of a gay man rather than a butch dyke, in spite of his female form. That sophistication of presentation, leaning the eye against the grain of the visible body to express an immaterial sense of self, is what caught my attention.

I'm drawn to people who do gender with style. I don't much care what their anatomies look like, which pronouns they usually get called or which they prefer, who they tend to fuck, or how they get off. I just love a good show. He was the most provocatively gendered person in the room that evening, a female-bodied faggot who suggested economies of pleasure that existed nowhere else in sight. I felt a very queer sort of attraction for this other transgendered person—a desire making only the most perfunctory gesture toward the homo/hetero binary.

He was surveying the crowd with a look of utter boredom, clearly on the verge of leaving as soon as he finished his drink, when I walked over with a blunt announcement that I liked the way he did his gender. Soon we were deep in conversation about the semiotics of clothing and how to use the kinetic language of bodies to negotiate a public identity. He told me he was a transfag and a bottom, I described myself as a “male-to-female transsexual lesbian faghag femme top who likes to cruise FTM leather boys and very butch bottoms.” Fifteen minutes later we were in his rented Ford Bronco, looking for a more congenial place to be a couple of gender queers.

We wound up at the only drag bar within driving distance, where we sat in a corner to talk and drink. A relatively good female impersonation show played on the tiny stage, but it failed to hold our attention for long. We began to compare notes on s/M: leather sex, rather than drag, was the subculture in which we had both first approached the issue of transgender identities. We both had discovered that like transsexuality, consensual s/M practice made it impossible to ignore the body: it provided exquisitely intense and intimate bodily experiences that didn't necessarily involve genital sexuality. But it had also helped each of us figure out exactly which parts of embodied subjectivity we could exercise agency over, which we could decide to live with, what we had to change. s/M, we agreed, offered a far better conceptual framework for exploring these life-changing choices than any scientific discourses on transsexuality we'd found. Changing sex is very heavy play.

By the time Patsy Cline handed the mike over to Diana Ross, we'd moved from shop talk to theory and back, flitting giddily from one critical form of

reference to another. We were such intellectual perverts; we never did get around to fucking that night.

A few months later, he came to San Francisco, and we made a date. His appearance had changed now that the testosterone had started kicking in: his voice was deeper, his smell subtly funkier, his body denser. The flattop had been replaced with a buzz cut, and except for the lack of beard on someone his age, he appeared unremarkably male. The incongruously smooth face worked nicely against the severity of his biker cap, leather vest, and motorcycle chaps, giving him a kind of charming vulnerability. I was wearing a short, tight, backless black velour dress that night, with heels so high I had to take his arm to steady myself. I guessed that he might be scared beneath that cocky veneer, and I wanted to offer him the security of a masculine role in relation to my ultrafemme image.

There was no way I could know what it felt like for him, transitioning to male, but a wave of empathy, a fierce desire to connect, swept over me as I clung to his arm. I remembered what early transition had been like for me, when the hormones were first coming on like a strong dose of acid. The estrogen coded and recoded reality, sculpted flesh like putty, blurred the contours of intelligible human forms by layering one gender schema on top of another until I appeared as a shimmering *moiré* pattern in the eyes of others. People interacted differently with me, depending on which part of the pattern they saw at any given moment, and then grew confused or hostile when I failed to continue sending the signal they just picked up. The input from the world around me became as capricious as the shape of my own body, as if my entire life were some vast television monitor and somebody else was channel surfing. I began to think some essential part of myself might fly away into the ether, like a balloon that's slipped its string.

I'd eventually learned to play with that sort of reality hacking as one of the peculiarly compelling effects of MTF embodiment, but I remembered with clarity when it had been a frightening and out-of-control experience. His experience with testosterone was undoubtedly different from mine with estrogen, but part of my pleasure that night, I decided, would be helping this man find the channel changer for himself.

I took him to the Motherlode, a transgender dive bar in the Tenderloin where most of the women are sex workers earning their surgery money. It's a surprisingly straight-looking place in spite of the fact that all the women there used to be men and all the men want to fuck women who have dicks: you don't see much that visually contests heteronormativity. But I wanted to

go there precisely because we'd be slightly out of synch with the scene and thus harder to slot into identifying categories.

Half of identity is what you put out, and half is how you're read. We were both obviously making statements, yet walking into the bar together we were damnably difficult to read. Butch-femme dykes? A drag and her daddy? A couple of straights? We stood out in the Motherlode, inviting interpretations. We could practically feel the gazes swirl around us, trying and failing to gender us. Woman/man, man/woman, woman/woman, man/man—we changed identities, orientations, and pronouns in every set of looks we exchanged with others.

I looked hard at him, wondering whether our self-identification as dyke and fag were going to bend enough for us to connect sexually this time. "Let's cut to the chase, girl," he finally whispered leaning over the table to nibble my ear. "I'm a bottom first and a faggot second. What you call yourself has no bearing on what I call myself. All I want is to get fucked. And as far as I'm concerned, I've just got three fuckholes instead of two." Grinning, I took his hand. We left the Motherlode for an s/m party South of Market, where I tied him down, beat him up, and took advantage of every orifice he had to offer.

Standing behind him again now on the deck in Silverlake, slapping my cat lazily against his thighs, I find myself replaying that previous time and wanting his cunt again. Desire, like pleasure, is never a simple thing, and like pleasure it makes me stop and think. Is my desire for him just curiosity about an exotic Other? How much am I like the trannie hawks prowling places where women like me sometimes sell our difference to strangers? Or is he the T-Bird, and I'm one of those women for him?

The endless struggle to reclaim transsexual erotics from the uses that non-transsexuals make of us angers me. But I know that sex between transsexuals is different from what happens in the Motherlode. At least neither is using the other to shore up a more normative sense of self. We've both refigured the identifications and partial objects others cobble together in ways that pass as normal. Object choice ceases to have much relevance as a concept here in this new space, because the objects at which desire might take aim have shattered into bits.

For me to enter him like this, MTF fist inside FTM vagina, is for us both to acknowledge the new reality we each locally materialize by our practice. So, it's not the partial object of his hole that I want but, rather, the excess that erupts there through his transsexual form, the surplus value of the codes that regulate gendered embodiment. His excess mirrors the archaic disarticulations from which "I" myself am fashioned and through which "I" perpetually

refashions itself. Maybe this is the transhomonarcissitic wellspring of my desire. Having traversed the territories of perversion and fetish, we have arrived at last at a realm beyond objects, a world of phenomenal flows. The deterritorialized flow itself is what I long to stick my hand in.

I am fisting his cunt hard, striving against the thin membrane of his flesh and the distance of the stars to touch the night sky over Los Angeles. Self crumbles here into the force that structures it, glittering shards of memory shedding like viruses into the blackness. I'm lifting him off his feet with the thrust of my forearm, wanting to reach beyond our bodies to grab hold of a new space where bodies matter differently.

There's a whip dangling by its strap from a wrist, the knot at its butt end slapping rhythmically against the crack of an ass as a fist disappears, reappears, disappears. I have almost lost sight of him. I hear his labored breathing beneath the black hood, think of the smooth-shaven head it covers. On one of the memory shards: the platinum blond flattop he wore when we met. On a second: Rutger Hauer in the rooftop scene in *Blade Runner*, in another fantasy of Los Angeles at night. I watch Hauer morph into Daryl Hannah before the two cinematic cyborg bodies merge with his and mine. Media-saturated memory fragments combine. They achieve ambience with our corporealized present and project us into a desired future produced through this very process of subjective transformation.

It is too often impossible to be transsexual in this world, too easy to be worn away by all the petty stigmata of daily living. Elsewhere, on the horizon, another prospect hovers at the vanishing point. Straying into the City of Night, hip-hop sex music carrying us from Sunset Strip to Times Square to the Tenderloin, each of us as tangible and phantasmatic as the urban dream-scape spread before us, we pause only long enough to spray-paint our names on the walls of the sensorium before we disappear into the darkness.

Somewhere, smooth muscle spasms around my fist, and I'm happy. I have no idea what made him come. He reaches for a postcoital cigarette, smoke rising into the night in a parody of movie clichés. I bask in his glow. In the distance, more police helicopters are circling, watching the horizon. It's almost time to go.

Note

First published in *Opposite Sex: Gay Men on Lesbians, Lesbians on Gay Men*, edited by Sara Miles and Eric Rofes (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 252–62.



DUNGEON INTIMACIES

The Poetics of Transsexual Sadomasochism

Site Survey

From Bernal Heights, the city of San Francisco spreads north and west, a slow-moving accretion in steel and glass, brick, and concrete, of the human desire unleashed and focused upon this terrain by the gold rush of 1848—an alchemical transformation of precious metal into philosopher’s stone upon which I sit and think.

Ian sits behind me on the grassy slope, his fingers anchored into my shoulders, his thumb expertly digging at the lump of knotted muscle between shoulder blade and spine where my keystroking and mousing actions accumulate. We’ve scarcely seen each other these past fifteen years and never known each other well in the ways that conventionally count as knowing someone well. But since he’s been back, we’ve fallen into a practical familiarity with one another’s bodies, rooted in our shared history of a particular subculture at a particular place and time that I think of as our “dungeon intimacy.”

The physical landscape is made of memories. Over there, to the right, a few hundred feet away, Del shot Cooper for the cover of *The Drag King Book*.¹ Extending my line of sight past that point toward the city’s eastern bay shore, I see the place by the abandoned steel foundry where Texas Tomboy

and Monika Treut filmed some scenes for *Gendernauts*.² Turning my head counterclockwise, I see the live-work lofts near the Bay Bridge, where Ian and I once watched Raelyn pierce and cut Cathy Opie for one of her bloody self-portraits. There's my house, down at the foot of Bernal Hill, where my partner and I now live. Ian, after years in New York, now lives with his family over there in Marin, north across the Golden Gate. We point out to each other various places we've each lived since the 1980s: around Berkeley and Oakland in the East Bay; Potrero Hill and half a dozen places in the Mission District here in the city. He says he sat in this very spot before, smoking pot with our friend Edward, back when he helped him run the LINKS s/m play parties, which I attended regularly for several years.

Off in the middle distance, west of downtown and south of Market Street, stands a large brick building—a fortress, really—built in Moorish Revival style, complete with crenelated turrets and deeply recessed apertures in the thick walls, from which cannons and rifles could be fired. It is the old San Francisco National Guard armory on Mission Street at 14th.³ We are both historians, Ian and I, who have been taught to encounter the space around us in four dimensions, extending our observations into patterns longer than our lived experience. There is Mission Dolores, established by Spanish priests in 1776, and its counterpart, the Presidio, a garrison farther to the west, near the mouth of the bay where the ships come in from the sea. Together they formed the original instruments of California's conquest and colonization, one housing church, and the other, army. Behind us, at the crest of Bernal Hill, is a small military telecommunications facility, a nondescript little cinderblock building sprouting metal appurtenances, humming low behind a chain-link fence and padlocked gate. It forms part of the current martial occupation and organization of the space we now inhabit.

The armory occupies an intermediate timespace framed and inflected by these maximal and minimal fixed points in temporal distance within the present built environment; it is the materialized remnant of its own distinctive meshwork of force relations, its own constitutive logics of movement, investment, and territory.⁴ Constructed in the years just prior to World War I, the structure addressed itself to the labor upheavals of late nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, to a tradition of urban mass protests, and to lingering memories of civil war. In housing troops and weapons whose function was to suppress popular insurrection and maintain government control over city streets, the armory enacted a shift in military attention—management of domestic populations supplanted the threat of coastal invasion. Its massive battlements point back in time toward the Presidio, but its placement in

the mixed residential-commercial working-class neighborhood surrounding Mission Dolores anticipated the contemporary biopolitical surveillance state.

A block and a half up 14th Street from the armory is the House of the Golden Bull, where the LINKS play parties took place, starting in 1989. The armory itself had been vacant since 1976, and its state of disrepair mirrored the surrounding neighborhood. Multistory houses built for multigenerational families around the turn of the last century had gone derelict in the post-World War II flight to the suburbs, and some, like the Golden Bull, had been snatched up by gay men with an eye for abandoned architecture. The Mission District abutted the homocentric Castro neighborhood and functioned, in its northwesterly extremes, as a spillover zone for populations marginal to the gay male society that had rooted there in the 1960s. A women's enclave had formed in the Mission in the 1970s, a few blocks southeast of the armory, around Valencia Street between 18th and 22nd, while the epicenter of the city's leather scene had been on the armory's northern side, in the south of the Market District along Folsom Street's "Miracle Mile." By the early 1990s, three decades of competition for land closer to downtown had driven the leather zone southwesterly, toward the Mission. The Catacombs, one of the city's most storied dungeon spaces, had been located a few blocks south of the armory on Shotwell at 17th. The Catacomb's sudden closure in 1989 contributed to the rise of the Golden Bull as an s/m party venue.⁵

The Golden Bull occupied the geographical margins of three urban zones, each characterized by distinct sexual subcultural formations and social movements—homosexuality and gay liberation, the women's movement and lesbian feminism, and the *ars erotica* of consensual sadomasochism. The property valuations of its physical site reflected the fallowness of its location in the overarching ecology of the city. The view from the back deck overlooked a disintegrating public housing project; its immediate neighbors were an edgy gay-owned art gallery, the dyke-run Black and Blue Tattoo, and Red Dora's Bearded Lady Cafe, where underground performance artist Harry Dodge and the lesbian punk band Tribe 8 held court. Pioneers of the pierced and tatted subcultural aesthetic shared street space (and sometimes substance-use habits and job descriptions) with the neighborhood's many junkies and sex-workers. The LINKS parties occupied a slice of time as precisely sited as their real estate. The AIDS pandemic was in full swing in those years before the antiviral cocktails, and s/m seemed situated at the very crux of the crisis—its precepts of negotiation and consent, its panoply of techniques for eliciting bodily sensation without exchanging bodily fluids,

its meticulous disarticulations of erotics from genital sexuality, all promised a viable future.

It was to dungeons such as the Golden Bull that Michel Foucault referred when he noted that, “you find emerging in places like San Francisco and New York what might be called laboratories of sexual experimentation.”⁶ The dungeon, I’ll suggest, in the pages that follow, is indeed just such a productive and transformative space as a laboratory—a space not merely for the discovery of an existing objective world but a playground, workshop, or place of study that is in fact a generative space, one facilitative of the materialization of creatively grasped virtualities. It is place as process: or, in geographer Doreen Massey’s words, place as a distinctive mixture, “gathering, and manifestation of local and global social, economic, and communications relations” that knot themselves up together for a length of time, and which become concretized in the objects that collectively constitute their place by assembling there.⁷

Jack Halberstam points out that Massey offers to queer theorists of embodiment, sexuality, and gender an alternative to the views of other post-modern geographers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja who privilege “the global” and distrust “the local” as place-bound, reactionary, and potentially fascist in its parochial distance from all things cosmopolitan.⁸ No place can be more local than the body. Within systems of thought that have a vested interest in ignoring the inescapable fact that even the most global analysis is tied to the particular (raced, sexed, classed, educated) body of the analyst who conceives it (because not to do so would unmask its enabling privileges), no place is shunted to the periphery of consideration with greater alacrity than is the body. Reconceptualizing every place, including the lived space of the body, as a “glocal” hybrid opens an important line of critical inquiry. As sociologist Avery Gordon points out, “we have become adept at discovering the construction of social realities and deconstructing their architecture,” but in telling the stories of these realities, we have not yet taken as seriously as we should the insight “that the intricate web of connections that characterize any event or problem *is* the story.”⁹

Transsexual sadomasochism incarnates the processes within and through which the body materializes the specificity of its location, installing the body that practices it as a place—one as contingent, situated, and real as any armory or repurposed Victorian house. In offering this autoethnographic account of embodied knowledges (and knowledges of embodiment) produced in a particular dungeon space, neighborhood, and historic moment, through my own past practices of transsexual sadomasochism, my intent is not to at-

tribute any particular importance to certain events simply because I, rather than someone else, participated in them. The goal, rather, is to open a critical space within which subjectively perceived phenomenological experiences can offer evidence for more widely applicable statements about the relationship between embodied subject and material environment. I offer these observations in the spirit of “pornosophy”—Shannon Bell’s apt coinage for the militant insistence on an epistemic parity between the disparate knowledges of the scientist, the philosopher, and the whore—and as a refusal to discredit what our own carnality can teach us.¹⁰

Topoanalysis and Rhythmoanalysis

Transsexual sadomasochism in dungeon space enacts a poesis (an act of artistic creation) that collapses the boundary between the embodied self, its world, and others, allowing one to interpenetrate the others and thereby constitute a specific place. It gestures toward the metaphysical counterscheme that haunts the margins of Western dualistic thought, wherein “the duality of subject and object,” in the words of philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard, becomes “iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions.”¹¹

“We are the diagrams of the functions of inhabiting” the spaces where we have lived intimately, Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*, his classic work on the experience of inhabiting the felicitous spaces we designate with concepts of “home.” “The word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget,” with these unforgettable spaces of our inhabitation.¹² Bachelard calls for a two-fold approach to spatial poetics: a “topoanalysis,” conceived as an auxiliary to psychoanalysis, that offers “a systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.”¹³ Its complement, a “rhythmoanalysis” that accounts for the reiterative temporal practices—habitual movements—through which we inhabit those sites. He is particularly concerned with the fluctuating movement between the “real” and the “unreal” whose dynamic interlacings produce the shimmering iridescence of poetic reverie, or common daydreaming. Bachelard shares with his psychoanalytic contemporaries Laplanche and Pontalis a concept of fantasy as inhabited structure (and of structure as inhabited fantasy).¹⁴ Space, as he conceives it, is simultaneously phantasmatic and material, furnishable with variable contents, both psychical and tangible, and within which it is possible to change positions as one would move about a house.

A hundred people or more might pack the Golden Bull for a well-attended LINKS party. One could not enter without an invitation. On party nights, one

approached the grated street-level door, where a monitor checked the name you gave against the RSVP list. One then proceeded up a flight of stairs and through another door to an anteroom off the entrance hall, where one paid the cover charge, checked one's coat and, if need be, changed one's clothes. One then passed through a kitchen and living room out to the deck, where one set of stairs led up to the owner's private floor and another set led down to the labyrinthine dungeon. One room held a waterbed, another a jail cell, and yet other mattresses, racks, crosses, ropeworks and suspension hooks, with conveniently situated hardware screwed into the walls and ceilings. A bathroom was reserved for piss play, scat, and blood sports. Sharps containers emblazoned with biohazard warning labels were placed in visible locations in every room, as were copious amounts of condoms and lube. Safety monitors kept an eye out for trouble, and medical care providers were on-site in case of emergency. Drugs and alcohol were not allowed. Mirrors and Day-Glo graffiti covered the unfinished drywalls. It was there in the dungeon that I first met Ian, sometime around 1991.

Coupling, though tolerated with a certain libertarian aplomb, was not the dominant mode of interpersonal relationship in the dungeon. The general ethos of the space favored a respectful openness to spontaneous liaisons, improvised orchestrations, and serendipitous multiplicities—like a cocktail party without drinks where the conversations were pantomimed in leather, or a jam session around the edges of which a solo jazz musician might hover before joining in. This made the dungeon a welcoming and convivial place, where one was encouraged to encounter fellow creatures with a sense of wonder and curiosity, with patience rather than judgment. Every person became for others a unique opportunity for the universe to reveal itself from a slightly different perspective—and some of the views were stunning.

The carefully curated guest list favored those unlikely to fit into other, more rule-bound and identity-defined, dungeon spaces—it was neither gender-segregated nor compulsorily heterosexual; it honored those who abided by the customs of “old leather” and carried its inherited wisdom, while celebrating freeform experimentation that broke with traditional subcultural knowledge and practice. LINKS, as its name suggested, forged connections where they otherwise might not have existed. I first encountered there the word queer, as it since has come to be used in academic and community discourse, in chill-out conversations after dungeon sessions in the summer of 1990. We used it to name the previously unnamed social formation taking shape at our parties, which we saw as part of a larger political and conceptual shift in identity-based social movements related to the AIDS crisis and,

a few months later, to anti-Gulf War activism. “Transgender” was a word I first encountered on a flyer advertising a LINKS “Gender Play Party,” early in 1991. For most of us there, gender was something we explored, analyzed, and experimented with in the context of a broader engagement with bodily practices and power; people came at questions of gender from many different angles and emotional investments, with no one right way to proceed. Since the 1990s, considerable ink has been spilled about the relationship between queer and transgender, transgender and transsexual, transgender, and genderqueer. For me, these things were linked at the outset.

I wander one night into the dungeon’s back room to find a writhing young body upright and spread-eagled, lashed naked to an X-shaped Saint Andrew’s Cross, its head shaved, its scalp encircled with a garland of temporary hypodermic-needle piercings through which a fine steel wire had been woven and tightened into a “crown of thorns.” Blood trickled down its face in an art-historical tableau vivant of martyrdom and plucked arrhythmically onto a plastic drop-cloth. A woman faced the young body, checking its pulse and respiration with a latex-gloved hand, wiping the proverbial blood, sweat and tears from its eyes and giving it occasional sips of water. Two others, whom I happened to know, were administering a thorough flogging. One was visibly tired—it had apparently been a long night. She gestured for me to take her place, and I stepped into the structure of the scene, surrendering myself to its established cadences.

Something serene and paradoxically solitary can be found in the experience of giving oneself over to the inhabitation and enactment of a shared pattern of motion—a contemplative solitude born of one’s ecstatic displacement into a space where the body actively receives and transmits the movements of others, allowing awareness to flit and alight throughout the transsubjective ensemble. A whip strikes flesh with sufficient force to blossom the creature’s skin red and welt it back toward the leather. The young thing moans a low moan, transforming the kinetic energy of the blow into an audible frequency by passing breath over slack vocal cords, and my attention is drawn toward the physicality of the assemblage we cohabit. “A child is being beaten,” no doubt, but my sense in the moment is that the Freudians, so invested in textual analyses and narrative outcomes, fail to grasp the philosophical-critical dimension of sadomasochistic practice when they approach it through the lens of oedipal sexuality.¹⁵ This is not, for me, primarily a sexual experience, and it is Freud’s contemporary Bergson, rather than Freud himself, who comes to mind.

In a passage of *Matter and Memory*, Bergson discusses the structure of the nervous system in the “animal series” that extends (in his teleological schema) from the Monera to *Homo sapiens*, in which he observes that even as a simple mass of protoplasm, living matter is irritable and contractile, “open to the influence of external stimulation,” to which it reacts physically, chemically, and mechanically. Stimulus/response is not an event structured by the boundary between inside and outside, between interior “self” and external “other,” but is rather a continuous movement in which a force’s vector is prolonged and deflected into the movements of living matter; it is a wave transmitting itself through various media. As organisms become more complexly organized, specialized parts—nerve cells, sense organs, the musculo-skeletal system—divide physiological labor in ways that permit more varied response. At some point, a neural organ—the brain—introduces the possibility of voluntary movement rather than automatic organic responses.

Bergson understands the brain to introduce a difference of degree rather than kind. In a simple reflex action, a “peripheral excitation” transmits a centripetal movement along an “afferent” nerve toward the central neural processing organ, before transmitting itself centrifugally back along an “efferent” nerve to “motor cells” that direct the energy of the stimulus back into the environment and thus continue its movement in a new direction. It is the complex branching of neurons in the brain that allows for voluntary responses; quite physically, Bergson suggests, the possibility of choice of movements is at root the lived awareness of stimuli circulating with electrochemical speed through multiple possible neural pathways in the brain, each of which can descend into a specific pattern of motor response. The brain, rather than having some “miraculous power” to change sensory input into a “representation of things” that can be symbolically manipulated, functions simply by introducing into the circulation of energetic flows through the body a duration, a time-lag (that is to say, more space) between the stimulus and response. Our consciousness of choice of movements in response to stimuli is nothing other than our inhabitation of a brainspace that holds the simultaneous presence of multiple potentials, each made possible by the physical complexity and carrying capacity of the neural network, only one of which will be actualized, in a quantum-like leap to a particular one of many virtualities, through the material actions of our body.¹⁶

Whether Bergson’s story can be recognized as true by today’s cognitive scientists is beside the point: reflecting on Bergson brings me to the place of poiesis. I envision my body as a meeting point, a node, where external lines

of force and social determination thicken into meat and circulate as movement back into the world. So much that constitutes me I did not choose; but, now constituted, I feel myself to be in a place of agency. I occupy a critical space, a distance between stimulus and response created by the complex social pathways converging in the dungeon, in which through my presence I gain the capacity to choose which patterns I will repeat, or which new patterns I might envision and enact. I invent new choreographies of space and time as I dance my whip across the creature's ass. It is not that I somehow internalize as my own the structure or content of the scene in which I participate, receiving its impression the way clay would receive a sculptor's mark. It is rather a proprioceptive awareness, as I flog, of the role of my body as medium in the circuit of transmissions, and of the material efficacy I possess in my subjective ability to choose one thing rather than another, or to poetically imagine the shape of a new pattern. The imagination, Bachelard says, takes up its place here, "exactly where the function of unreality comes to charm or to disturb—always to awaken—the sleeping being lost in its automatisms."¹⁷

Gender is a percussive symphony of automatisms, reverberating through the space of our bodies before there is an awareness of awareness itself. Who can say why I heard its music the way I did? All I know is that from earliest memory I disliked being called "he" and longed to be addressed as "she." I wanted to look like what I considered myself to be and perceived that I was profoundly misplaced—all of which evoked in me the utter sadness of feeling irremediably lost and alone in a situation impossible to rectify. I was not where others looked for me, and I was where they saw me not. Lacan says that "the real" is the place that is always returned to; these feelings were real. I am agnostic as to their origin. I did not choose them. I chose only how I would inhabit the architecture of their affect.

For a long time, the little perceiving one who had been surprised to find, while still so very young, that it related to its place of habitation in a manner quite different from others whom it knew, remained quietly observant. It first encountered another to dwell with it in the awareness of its difference in the nineteenth year of its body's extrauterine life. My girlfriend and I had just finished fucking, and I was stretching next to our bed like a well-fed cat when I felt a pinch on my left buttock. Without turning around or looking down, I swatted vigorously at what I thought were my girlfriend's fingers. As it turned out, she had leaned over to bite me playfully on my ass-cheek; my slap caught her perfectly on the side of the face and sent her reeling across the room. She was sobbing, and I was mortified that I had hurt her. But what eventually became clear, through her tears and my guilty self-recriminations, was that she

had found it terribly exciting that I had hit her, and a secret history of desire began spilling forth. She wondered if I might not do it again. In all honesty I had never even dreamed of doing such things to another person—but just as honestly, I also have to say that something previously unnamed and unrecognized in me did not hesitate to answer, “Yes.” And so it was that I felt obliged to offer her the gift of a reciprocal vulnerability and invited her into a realm of feelings I had always occupied without companionship. After a pregnant pause she replied, “The hardest thing about asking you to hit me was overcoming the fear of being hit by a man.”

Cut to 1991, a decade later, and s/m had become for me what it was for many of the people who shared dungeon space at LINKS parties—a technology for the production of (trans)gendered embodiment, a mechanism for dismembering and disarticulating received patterns of identification, affect, sensation, and appearance and for reconfiguring, coordinating, and remapping them in bodily space. I could hear people use names and pronouns in reference to me that I could agree to answer to. I could feel the touch upon my body of clothes that encouraged certain modes of comportment or stylized manners of moving, clothing that gendered me in the act of wearing them. In dungeon space I could see a woman in the mirror, and step into the place of woman in the structure of another’s desire, to witness those bodily signs—the heaves and shudders and seeping fluids—that attested to my viable occupation of that fantasized place for them.

There are those who say that magic is the art and science of creating change in accordance with the will. Transsexual body modification is one such practice.¹⁸ It became the means through which I grasped a virtuality manifested in dungeon space and gave it a materiality capable of extending its effects beyond the dungeon walls. It is in such moments of magical transformation that, according to Bachelard, “the commitment of the imagining being is such that it no longer functions as the subject of the verb ‘to adapt oneself.’” This is the moment of poesis, when that which has been grasped extends itself into the world, thereby transforming not only “the imagining being,” but others and the environment that holds them.

My arm tires and I take my turn supporting the young creature’s head, holding its eyes with mine, cradling it, and attending to its bodily needs. Such are the intimate sites of queer reproduction. This moment of dungeon intimacy is but one of many over the years that collectively will conjure a new social reality. Deleuze is right to say that sadomasochism deromanticizes love and eroticizes the world.¹⁹ Later, hanging out in the kitchen, I learn that my playmate calls himself Ian and lives in the world as a woman. He was just be-

ginning a PhD program in US history, at another campus of the same university where I was in the final stages of finishing mine. We ran around together for a while, whenever he was in town, until he moved to New York. Sometimes, in the years ahead, we would happen upon one another at academic conferences. Small world.

Reprise

From Bernal Heights, the city of San Francisco spreads over the land to the north and west, a slow-moving accretion in steel and glass, brick, and concrete, of the human desire unleashed and focused upon this terrain by the famous gold rush of 1848—an alchemical transformation of precious metal into philosopher's stone that thinks through me on it.

This landscape is made of memories. Much of what I knew from the early '90s is now gone. That community dispersed for all the usual reasons: death, whimsy, jobs, familial obligations. The dot-com boom came in on top of that, property values rising like a tsunami that washed people away, across the Bay toward Oakland, or to the Sierra foothills, or over the mountains entirely and far away. It was a force of nature, and the space filled back in different from how it had been before. I see the armory, enormous Gay Pride rainbow flags flying from its turrets. It was purchased late in 2006 by Kink.com, an s/m internet porn site that had started shooting its own movies, needed more studio space, and loved the building's faux-Moorish interior stonework and soundstage-sized troop assembly rooms. Kink.com is a quintessentially San Franciscan kind of porn business—it provides safe working conditions, pays its workers well, and generously gives back to the neighborhood and the s/m community. And yet as it streams its dematerialized digital media images onto the World Wide Web, it supplies an image of the new relations between space and life now being materialized in the fabric of the city and enacts the relentless commodification and privatization of all we know.²⁰

I wonder aloud about the space of my own body and the practices that have installed it here. I want to claim that transsexual sadomasochism affords me a glimpse of non-unique revolutionary potentials—exemplifying the materially productive effects of extending and prolonging into the world poetically generated patterns of response to external conditions, demonstrating how body modification can become a site of social transformation, proving that the real can be materialized differently than it now is or once was. Ian points toward the armory and reminds me that all present materializations become relics, and that nothing prevents their capture by normativizing pro-

cesses or their absorption into the stream of commodities. He wonders if perhaps I am being sentimental, or nostalgic. Perhaps, but that's not how it feels.

A work by the avant-garde genderqueer performance group Antony and the Johnsons comes to mind, "The Cripple and the Starfish."²¹ I have it on my iPod, and Ian and I share an earbud apiece to listen to ANOHNI, in the role of the titular cripple, sing of a sadomasochistic love:

It's true I always wanted love to be hurtful
And it's true I always wanted love to be filled with pain and bruises . . .
And there's no rhyme or reason I'm changing like the seasons Watch!
I'll even cut off my finger
It will grow back like a Starfish!
I am very happy So please hit me
I am very very happy So come on hurt me
I'll grow back like a Starfish

I am moved, from my postoperative transsexual perspective, by the singer's plaintive association of amputation with the yearning for a transformation of affect. In the song, the (fantasy of the) self-inflicted bodily wound functions to create a space of subjective fulfillment. The empty space of the missing digit is produced, through an act of evacuation, as a space of regeneration. That space, being void and not filled, allows for the movement of desire into it. It is thus not memberlessness itself that is desired, but the subjective experience of transformative growth in which absence becomes the space of possibility.

In that the amputation of the member produces a space of actualization, it functions as *chora*—an ancient Greek concept with the double meaning of both an enclosed space and the act of enclosing, which figured prominently in Plato's cosmogony and which has become a contested site in feminist post-structuralist reworkings of the Western philosophical tradition. In Plato's *Timaeus*, the *chora* is as his phallogentric philosophy imagines the womb to be, a passive vessel for the active male elements from which the world is formed. Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Elizabeth Grosz, and others have emphasized the active function of enclosing, holding, and containing to assert the positive contribution of the *chora* in the process of generation as a space generative of movement that spills forth from containment.²²

From my forward-facing perspective, I look back on my body as a psychically bounded space or container that becomes energetically open through the break of its surface—a rupture experienced as interior movement, a

movement that becomes generative as it encloses and invests in a new space, through a perpetually reiterative process of growing new boundaries and shedding abandoned materialities: a mobile, membranous, temporally fleeting and provisional sense of enfolding and enclosure. This is the utopian space of my ongoing poesis.

The August sun is farther west in the sky. Ian removes my iPod earbud and decides he needs to leave for home immediately to beat the traffic back across the bridge. We amble downhill toward house and car, chattering about the mundane details of the remainder of our respective days. He has to cook dinner and stay home with her kid while her partner goes to an art class, but that's all right because he's chairing his department this year and has a lot of administrative crap to catch up on. I'm meeting my son and his girlfriend in Oakland for anime and sushi, then coming home for a late night hot-tub-and-cocktails date with my partner before heading off to bed. I've accepted a visiting professorship in Vancouver this coming academic year and find my moments with him already suffused with a longing that extended absence shortly will bring. Tomorrow I really need to finish an overdue article, because the editor is breathing down my neck. Ian and I hug our fond goodbyes and kiss with a dungeon intimacy.²³

Our bodies are spaces set in motion; motions set in space: what trace of their generative locations do these mobile architectures make as they extend into the world?

Notes

First published in *Parallax* 14, no. 1 (2008): 36–47. Thanks to Julian Carter for our renewed friendship, permission to speak freely, and comments on the text. Thanks as well to Rita Alfonso for critical input, and to Gretchen Till for conversations on architecture.

- 1 Volcano and Halberstam, *The Drag King Book*.
- 2 Treut, *Gendernauts*.
- 3 On the armory, see Till, "Space of Reception"; and Shermatta, "Mission Armory."
- 4 On the framing and inflection of architectural space, see Cache, *Earth Moves*.
- 5 Charting the queer geography of San Francisco is a work in progress; much of this commentary is drawn from personal knowledge, and from unpublished data in the "Sites Database," at the GLBT Historical Society, <https://www.glbthistory.org/>. See also Califa, "San Francisco: Revisiting the City of Desire"; G. Rubin, "The Valley of the Kings"; and Stryker, "How the Castro Became San Francisco's Gay Neighborhood."
- 6 Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," 19–20; Davis, "History and the Laboratory of Sexuality."

- 7 Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," 240.
- 8 Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 12.
- 9 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 20 (emphasis in original), as cited in Rocque Ramirez, "A Living Archive of Desire," 117.
- 10 Bell, "Fast Feminism."
- 11 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxv.
- 12 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 15.
- 13 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 8.
- 14 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme" [Fantasy and the origins of sexuality], *Les Temps Modernes* 215 (1964): 1833–68, as reprinted in Burgin, Donald, and Kaplan, *Formations of Fantasy*.
- 15 Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten."
- 16 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*.
- 17 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxv.
- 18 Cameron, *Body Alchemy*.
- 19 Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty."
- 20 Robin Rinaldi, "The New Pornographers," *San Francisco 7 × 7*, August 1, 2006.
- 21 Antony and the Johnsons, "The Cripple and the Starfish," *Antony and the Johnsons* (Duturo, 2000), CD.
- 22 Grosz, "Women, Chora, Dwelling"; Butler, "Irigaray/Plato," in *Bodies That Matter*, 36–49; Sophia, "Container Technologies."
- 23 I am reminded of an article by Carolyn Dinshaw, who, in commenting on the queerness of the kiss between Gawain and Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, noted how the heteronormative text is "preoccupied with keeping the depths and fissures" of queerness "from bursting forth" from the men's kiss, as its words labor "to limit the significance of its signs, the nature of its characters, [and] the meanings of their actions," in order to reduce a "polyvalent sign" to "monovalent meaning." It is precisely the queer work of producing polyvalent meanings from "dungeon intimacies" that I hope my actions may accomplish. Dinshaw, "A Kiss Is Just a Kiss," 205.



PERFECT DAY

I still think of it as my perfect day; a day whose date I can't remember now, in June 1980. I was a few weeks shy of my nineteenth birthday and had blown every last cent of my savings to get myself to Europe, to spend the summer backpacking around to “find myself.” For the first time in my life, I was entirely outside the context of family and friends, away from everybody who had any expectations of who I was or what I was supposed to be.

I'd made it across Germany and France to the UK and had worked my way north from London to the Lake District when my perfect day arrived. I was staying at a hostel in Ambleside and had planned a day of ridge walking—just me in my woolly gray sweater, low stone walls, contented sheep, and stunning views. I had been unwinding for weeks, visiting places I remembered from my army-brat childhood in Bavaria, getting my first taste of Paris hauteur, thrashing in the mosh pit at Hammersmith Palais when Burning Spear opened for The Clash. I had been to Stonehenge and Stratford-on-Avon, and now I was setting off to commune with the souls of romantic poets, a slim volume of Coleridge tucked in my daypack. I look back fondly, with some bemusement, on how sincere and naive I was then.

My thoughts were drifting, as teenage thoughts are wont to do, and turned to the question of love. I had been dissatisfied, I had to admit, but I myself was largely to blame. I had not been honest with my girlfriends—all four of

them at that point—about what I was really looking for in a relationship. It was impossible to separate what I wanted from them, from what I wanted for myself. I can't honestly say that I considered myself a lesbian at that point in my life. I was born male but had puzzled over gender as long as I could remember. Gender had never been an assumption for me; had always been a question.

When I was very little, I remember nonchalantly thinking that I would grow up to be a woman. I'm agnostic about where these thoughts and feelings came from, but they were phenomenologically persistent and undeniably real. When I realized, around age five, the normative relationship between genital difference and social gender, it surprised and shocked me. This presented a *huge* problem. Were my self-perceptions wrong? Had I made a mistake? Or was everybody else wrong about me? What was real, and what wasn't? Who got to say who was a boy and who was a girl? Why, I wondered, did the pronoun "she" feel like the one I wanted to name me? Why, when somebody said "he," in reference to me, did I shrug inwardly, with the unvoiced qualifier, "Well, I understand why you might think so, but that's not really what I am"? These early conundrums became the bedrock of my later intellectual life as I pursued an unlikely career as a transgender theorist, historian, and filmmaker.

Living as a boy was nonconsensual. I had been plopped, never asked, into a gender I would not have chosen. I accepted my status only provisionally, pending further assessment of my situation. I didn't know if it would be possible for me to leave, any more than if it would be possible for me to stay. I started dreaming of bodily transformations as a potential escape route. I dreamed of machines that changed the shape of my genitals, gave me breasts, made my hair long. I dreamed the emotional logic of coercive normalization within consumer capitalism: some adult would recognize my girlish proclivities, take me out to buy girl things, but then laugh at me—as if they had successfully pulled a prank—when I admitted that I really thought of myself as a girl. I would always awaken feeling furious and betrayed.

I turned bookish, always looking from the corner of my eye for answers to the gender questions, and became precociously erudite in the process. My mind was often elsewhere than my body; still, I didn't let the unresolved status of my gender identity paralyze me. I tried to get on with things and make the best of it. I didn't needlessly resist my socialization, picked my battles, bided my time. I watched war movies, played football, swam competitively, learned to swear like a motherfucker and get stupid in public with alcohol. Like everybody else, I learned where the boundaries were drawn between

masculinity and femininity and knew where I was situated. I learned that voicing questions about gender did not elicit helpful answers and sometimes created problems for oneself. Truth be told, I always felt like being a guy was a perfectly fine way of being in the world. I was just never convinced it was my way. I wondered why it mattered what gender you happened to be, but still couldn't shake my sense of preference.

I dreamed about girls, starting around age six. It usually went something like this. A classmate or neighbor-girl I thought was really funny or smart or cute or nice would confess she had a secret crush on me. (A black-haired, dark-eyed tomboy beauty in my first-grade class, who showed up at school every so often looking uncomfortable in a pink Jackie-O skirt and suit jacket was my first such inamorata.) My family, however, would be on the verge of moving away (which we did with some regularity in real life). The girl would want me to stay with her, and her parents would agree to take me in.

All of my clothes and toys would accidentally be sent away with my own family, and then, due to some emergency like falling in a mud puddle or being attacked by a stray dog, my only remaining set of boy's things would be ruined. Of course, my girlfriend would lend me some of her clothes until mine could be replaced, whereupon she would then discover, much to her surprise and delight, what a nice little girl I made. Her parents would be accommodating; they'd always wanted to raise another girl, and my own parents miraculously agreed to let me stay.

She and I would be *friends*—not boyfriend and girlfriend—just friends, practically sisters. We would do all sorts of things together because we really liked being with each other and would be best friends forever. Somewhere around puberty, these dreams became sexual. What could possibly be sweeter than discovering that your best friend, with whom you shared so many special things, loved you in a special sort of way?

So I wasn't quite a transsexual lesbian on that perfect day in the Lake District, a few weeks shy of my nineteenth birthday in the summer of 1980, but I was pretty darn close. I just didn't know what to call myself yet.

Somewhere between the ages of ten and thirteen (based on where I remember living at the time), I read a *Dear Abby* advice column in the newspaper. A woman wrote to say that she had discovered her husband had been sneaking into her closet and trying on her clothes; she wondered if her husband was secretly homosexual. Abby told her that homosexuals were people who loved people of their own sex and that it didn't have anything to do with cross-dressing. She said the woman's husband could possibly be a transsexual, who was a person who considered himself or herself a member of the

opposite sex, but that most likely her husband was a transvestite, who was somebody who had no desire to change sex but enjoyed wearing the clothing of the opposite sex.

Eureka! Language is truly a gift from the gods. Not only did I now have definitive proof that I was not the only person to have ever questioned their own gender, I also had a vocabulary to help me frame my thoughts. And off to the public library I rode, unconsciously fey, on my purple Schwinn Sting-Ray with the banana seat and sissy bar, handle-bar streamers flying furiously in the wind.

The library was hugely disappointing. “Transsexualism” was indeed listed in the subject classifications of the card catalog, but the only books treating the topic were textbooks of abnormal psychology. I read that transsexuals were deeply disturbed people who feared being homosexual, or who felt guilty about being homosexual, and who wanted to be members of the other sex so that their sexual feelings would appear normal. Sadly, I concluded that I was not a transsexual after all, because not only did I not consider myself abnormal, I also did not consider homosexuality repulsive. In fact, I thought it sounded pretty cool.

My own budding desires revolved around what the porn magazines stashed under the mattresses in friends’ bedrooms called “girl-on-girl action.” I knew that if I was one of those women in the magazines, I wouldn’t gingerly touch the tip of my tongue to the tip of hers, or place one long painted nail against her nipple—I’d crush her lips to mine and fondle her breast voraciously as she fondled mine. What I didn’t know was how to put my body into the stories I saw in those pictures or into the fantasies of transformation I dreamed of at night.

I decided that, since I obviously wasn’t transsexual, I must be some heretofore unnamed kind of creature. In retrospect, it seems like it would have been so easy to put two of those terms I found together—to name my emerging sense of self as both transsexual and homosexual—but at the time the categories seemed mutually exclusive, so round and round I went: I feel like I’m really a girl so I could be transsexual, but if I’m transsexual I’m supposed to want to be with guys, but if I’m transsexual in order to be with guys then that means I’m repulsed by homosexuality, but I’m actually attracted to homosexuality, especially homosexuality in women, but a homosexual woman wouldn’t like me because I have a guy body, but I could be homosexually involved with women if I were a woman, and I could be a woman if I was transsexual, but I can’t be transsexual because that means I’m attracted to guys and repulsed by homosexuality . . . and in the end, teenage passions being what

teenage passions are, it was easier to just keep my mouth shut and date the women who wanted to date me, all of whom happened to be straight.

And that's what I was thinking about as I walked along the ridge lines of the Lakeland Fells on my perfect day. I was wondering who I would love, and who would love me, and how we would love, given the complexities of my gender. My girlfriends had all been nice people, and I still carry happy thoughts of good times with them all. One was a fiery-tempered cheerleader running away from an abusive father and living with an older brother. Another was a sweet, pot-smoking rock-and-roll groupie who was one of the most relaxed, fun-loving people I've ever yet encountered. The third was a high-strung, mixed-up daughter of nouveau riche parents; she had—I kid you not—two uteri. For the fourth, I was a way of rebelling against a controlling and over-protective mother. I enjoyed sex with them all. It actually felt fantastic to penetrate their vaginas with my penis, because it felt like my penis had gone away. It wasn't dangling about and poking around but was put away someplace nice that let me push the little spot at the base of my shaft that I always thought of as my clit right up against my girlfriend's bush, and grind against her until we both came. While fucking, my penis—superfluous—disappeared.

All my girlfriends thought I was such a sweet boy, said I wasn't like the other guys, said they could talk to me, said they liked the way I listened to them, said they appreciated that I liked to do things with them besides fuck and seemed to enjoy my just hanging out with them. Then something would happen, some slip, some antigay slur, perhaps. Maybe they would laugh the wrong way when television comedian Flip Wilson did his "Geraldine" character, or make gagging noises when talking about transsexual tennis player Renée Richards, whose story was then much covered in the daily papers. It was always something, some little pin to burst the bubble of what she and I could, in my dreams, be to each other. I would know then that she was not the one for me. Not that I ever let on, until the usual vagaries of time drifted us apart.

It wasn't much of a climax, my little epiphany, that afternoon on the ridge. It was more like something dropped away. I had been shedding bits of my familiar self for weeks, all across Europe, when another little piece of scale fell from my inner eye, and I found myself alone at last in a quiet moment of clarity and insight. It simply became obvious to me that I would never have a meaningful relationship with a woman unless I told her how I really felt about myself, which was that I loved women, had a male body, had never thought of myself as a man, didn't seem to qualify as a transsexual, and had never been turned on by anything other than the thought of being in a lesbian relationship.

The question of whether or not I would ever try to change my body, if that was somehow possible for a normal nontranssexual like me, or what kind of body I would have, or how I would live in public, had to be an open-ended question within the relationship. I didn't know yet what kind of flaming creature I was, but I wanted companionship while I tried to figure it out. I wanted to find somebody who was interested in the process. I decided that, upon returning home, I would make a point of dating bisexual women—women who knew how to eroticize a relationship with a woman but could enjoy making love with a male body. I would come out to my lovers about my sense of self early in the relationship, because if they couldn't hang with the situation, it was all for the best that things end quickly. And that, a few weeks later, is precisely what I did.

She was in my fencing class. There was something about the way she sat cross-legged, her unapologetic armpit hair, her awkward brashness, that big sexy Jewish nose that tipped me off. Dyke. Probably a hardcore feminist. I was smitten. Not being properly socialized into the subtleties of womyn-loving-womyn courtship, I tried to engage her with some stupid conversational gambit, and if she hadn't noticed that I was left-handed, she probably would have blown me off and life would have been very different. But left-handers have a slight advantage in fencing—our attacks always come from the off-side in relation to most everybody else's—and she wanted to practice against me. We spent the next decade fencing with each other, and we both drew blood in the end.

I loved that she would engage with me, fight with me, play with me, argue with me, take me as seriously as I took her. I loved that she spoke German. I loved that she loved movies and would talk about them and not just watch them and eat her popcorn and be done with it. We would disagree passionately over why we both liked the same thing. Our first date was a triple feature of Bergman, Fassbinder, and Herzog. Our second date was the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. By our third date, we'd come out to each other—she wasn't sure she liked guys, I wasn't sure I was one. It worked for both of us, more or less from the time I was nineteen until I was almost thirty. We got married, went off to graduate school together, made a home together, had a child together. I was so happy being seen through my lover's eyes. I thought I knew what the shape of my life would look like. But I was wrong.

There was that nagging little question about my embodiment. We circled around it. All of our sex fantasies and bedroom stories and erotica-reading were lesbocentric. All of our family life felt gender egalitarian—how we split up the chores, how we parented, how we took turns with work and school

and supported each other. It felt like lesbian domesticity. I grew increasingly disenchanted with only my lover seeing me as I saw myself. The person I was to myself, the person I was with her, was not the person I was to everyone else who mattered in my life. She insisted that I keep the matter between us alone. I grew increasingly alienated from my genitals but was perfectly happy to fuck with fingers, tongues, toys, or anything else. By this time, I'd come around to the conclusion that, regardless of what some old textbooks had said, one could in fact be a transsexual lesbian, that one had the power to name oneself. It was just a matter of persuading others to go along with you. I started describing myself to my partner as a preoperative transsexual lesbian who was still living as a man but no longer wanted to do so.

She did not want me to change. She feared what her family would think. We had both read feminist and lesbian literature and knew the feminist party line on transsexual lesbianism—no fake females allowed in the club. She feared we would be ostracized, would have no community, wouldn't find work, wouldn't have a place to live, would be poor and marginalized, our parents would disown us, and our child would be scarred for life by the stigma. These were not unrealistic fears, and she wanted to be safe. She wanted to retain heterosexual privilege, even if she felt she was queer. My body was her closet, and she didn't want me to come out.

Things turned ugly in all the ways that divorce is usually ugly. One afternoon, after a sleepless night filled with bitter grief and mutual recriminations, I was lying, dazed and spent, in the grass beside our apartment building. I felt as if my entire life was being ripped away and the void was staring into me. My thoughts spun back to that perfect day, a decade earlier, when familiar life had been stripped away in a more pleasant fashion, and I consciously stepped onto the path that led me here. I found again, unbidden as before, that same sense of inner clarity that welled within me then. The path went forward. I took my step, she and I parted ways, and I started my transition.

Regrets, I've had a few, but not about transitioning. Regardless of how it might have affected my relationships with other people, it's what was right for me. Nobody else can live my life for me, so how I live in my body for myself is the necessary basis for every other relationship I have with anyone else. I'm completely clear about that now. Fortunately, all of the people who really mattered in my life, except my ex, stayed with me through my transition, and I found wonderful new people along the way to share life's adventures.

I started living as a woman in the early 1990s in San Francisco, just as "queer" (as opposed to old-school baby-boomer gay and lesbian) was coming into currency. I'd never seen a good place for myself in the old economy

of sexual identities anyway, and felt very comfortable calling myself queer. I was gender queer. I also liked a new word that started getting tossed around about this time, “transgender.” I felt it fit me and created a bit of distance between the old medical mindset associated with “transsexual” and the bohemian life I was living. I cared nothing about passing, everything about being seen for what I was: a queer woman in the process of leaving a male body behind. I didn’t care, if my girlfriend didn’t, that I still sported nonstandard equipment. I was saving my pennies to replace the factory-installed model with something custom-built anyway, and just wanted her to love me and have crazy, sexy fun while I scraped my surgery money together. I wanted her to look forward to the prospect of eating me out as much as I looked forward to spreading my legs for her.

Life, in many respects, became a dream come true. My body, and the life I lived through it, was finally aligned with the structure of my deepest desires and identifications. I was happy. I had been prepared for a solitary existence post-transition but found that I was desirable to many women I desired. Lesbian transphobia, while real, turned out to be more monolithic in theory than in practice. I went wild for a few years, dated widely, played around casually, frequented orgies, slept my way across town. No names, but a few college professors, a couple of magazine editors, a stripper, a secretary, a dominatrix, a tattooist, a performance artist, a lawyer, a graphic designer, an abortion clinic manager, and two butch dykes in the process of transitioning female-to-male. (If I’ve forgotten anyone, forgive me.) I learned to see myself in relation to a lot of different women (and a few men), and I came into my own.

I would have been content to live my life with three of those people. One was dating someone else at the same time she was dating me, and ultimately chose to be with the other woman. I was sad, but these things happen, and I got over it. She and I run into each other now and then at professional meetings, and sometimes we get together for a drink when we happen to be in the same city. I always think it’s nice to see her. Another I would have shackled up with quite happily had she felt able to leave a long-term nonmonogamous relationship. We had horrible timing with each other for years, one of us was involved in a primary relationship with somebody else when the other was free, and vice versa. After a while, we reconciled to the fact that for each of us the other was “the one that got away,” and we settled down into a really warm, close, and ongoing friendship. The third became my life partner throughout my thirties.

She was younger than me by eight years, punky butch-of-center in appearance but an outdoorsy granola dyke just beneath the skin, same shoe size as

me and almost my height, with hazel eyes like my father. We lived a life we considered self-consciously radical: polyamorous, collectivist, anarchist, activist, artistic, intellectual. I didn't have a regular job and made my living teaching around as adjunct faculty, writing books and magazine pieces, picking up speaking gigs, doing odd jobs and piecework, while doing my part to turn transgender studies into a recognized academic field. I told people I was just a girl who lived by her wits, and it was true. It was hard economically, but it was also utterly, romantically, wonderfully, free—just another word for nothin' left to lose.

We felt like we were reinventing the world, reinventing family, reinventing love, reinventing ourselves. She had a child we co-parented, along with my son, and we lived with people who felt more like kin than roommates. We all somehow managed to buy a house together before the dot-com boom drove real estate prices through the roof. It was a big place, and we turned it into a commune. We had the best dinner parties and the most interesting houseguests in the world. Somewhere along the way I finally had my surgery. We thought we were the revolution. And in a way, we were.

Revolutions have a way of turning out other than you expect, and this one was no exception. Our former housemates partnered up and moved away, and we started renting out rooms. My partner started her own business, started writing books of her own, and that took up a lot of her time. I landed a postdoctoral fellowship and then accepted a job as the executive director of a nonprofit organization. I worked a lot. The kids were getting older, and just schlepping them to school and karate and playdates with friends took a big chunk out of the daily schedule. Life wasn't quite as wild as it once was, but I felt fine. I felt like I was turning into the woman I'd once imagined I'd grow up to be.

Maybe it was lesbian bed-death. Maybe it was, truth be told, that she was freaked out by my genital surgery, and it triggered her survivor-of-sexual assault issues. Maybe she had been too young when we got together, and she had the best of intentions but just grew in a different direction. Maybe she never loved me the way that I loved her. Maybe it's that she secretly wanted to be monogamous. Maybe it's just that she fell in love with somebody else. Maybe it was that I'd gotten fat, or liked to drink more than she did, or would sometimes self-medicate my stress with nicotine. It was probably all of the above. After ten years that felt to me like our relationship was getting steadily better, she suddenly bugged out and left me for one of my former students, a trans guy I'd tried to mentor, somebody as much younger than her as she was to me. It blindsided and shattered me. For the second time in my life, I

felt like my world had crashed, but this time there was no salving memory of a quiet inner place, unexpectedly encountered on a perfect summer day. There was only pain.

That was five years ago, but what they say is true—time is a healer. I'm in a new relationship now and so far, so good. My current partner is somebody I had dated during my polyamorous days with my second long-term lover, so she'd already been in my life for some time. After my unexpected breakup, we saw no reason to stop seeing each other, and we moved cautiously ahead. A year or so of inconsolable grieving on my part, tentative steps toward new couplehood, weekly relationship counseling (we are, after all, middle-aged, middle-class lesbians, for whom psychotherapy is a subcultural norm), and finally moving in together about a year ago. It feels solid. It feels like we've both been around the block a time or two now and know how to do relationships right this time. We take nothing for granted.

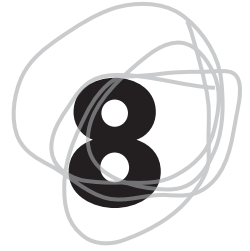
It's not always easy between us, but it's mostly the routine kind of not easy. We both have kids from previous relationships with us part-time, and blending families is sometimes a challenge. There are some unresolved in-law issues. We're from different class backgrounds. She's detail-oriented and I'm a big-picture gal who's fuzzy on the small stuff, which sometimes creates tension. She pouts when I travel, and I get annoyed when she kvetches. We both like to get our way and usually think we're right about everything. Some nights, one of us winds up sleeping alone in a huff. She'd been a lesbian for twenty years before she met me, but now that we're together, some of her old friends have distanced themselves. I'm sorry that she's suffered a loss for loving me. We've made new friends together, though, and kept the best of her old bunch as well as mine. My crowd thinks she's swell.

So, where does that leave us? We love each other and try to be nice to each other, because life's too short for unnecessary unpleasantness. We like traveling together and watching movies at home. We've established a good domestic rhythm. We find each other sexy. She often laughs at my jokes, and I think her smile is exquisitely beautiful every time I see it. We take pleasure in our work, and our material needs are abundantly met. We enjoy our hot tub and a cold cosmopolitan cocktail on chilly San Francisco nights. Sometimes when I'm soaking, watching the low clouds scuttle in from the sea, I think back to that perfect day, the summer I turned nineteen. I came down from the ridge in the evening, and walked back into town, where I picked up some lamb meat, rosemary, and potatoes to make myself a stew. After dinner I drew a hot bath and threw open the big, leaded glass bathroom window to look up at the hills I'd climbed earlier in the day. The steam rose and the water cooled

as I lay in the tub, and the dusk turned darker, and the nighttime fell. I look at my partner and think: I have a lot of perfect days now.

Note

First published in *Trans People in Love*, edited by Tracie O'Keefe and Katrina Fox (New York: Routledge, 2008), 43–54.



KETAMINE JOURNAL

The closest I can come to describing today's experience in words is the *glocal hybridity* concept promulgated by feminist philosopher Doreen Massey. Basically, imagine any given point, including one's own body, as the intersection of a potentially infinite number of lines of influence or determination, some shorter (more local) and some longer (more global). These contingent, happenstance lines of different spatiotemporal lengths and durations are all knotted together, with no purely "local" place nor a strictly "global" one, just glocal hybridity, always and everywhere.

I visualize my body lying on a couch in a Castro District psychotherapy office as the convergent point of innumerable brightly colored storylines, like yarn threaded through a hole where a nail once was: short lines of proximal narratives—how I knew the person who referred me to the clinic—and longer storylines like the ones that brought me to the Bay Area for grad school, the ones that raveled my sense of being trans, the ones of how the Castro became queer and San Francisco psychedelic, how certain people colonized North America to become white. I visualize my individual lineage back to the southern plains of Oklahoma, to the Ozarks in Arkansas, to the Chesapeake Bay Tidewater in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries and to Scotland before that. On my father's side, the ancestors came to North America from

Aberdeenshire in the 1660s. If Ancestry.com is to be believed (I know, as a good queer, that all kinship is fictive) my mother's mother's line can be traced back to Gruoch ingen Boite, Lady MacBeth, and through her to the legendary kings of Dál Riata. For a flash today I was zooming through a long green tube that ran toward them, back to a landscape that my waking self first visited in the summer of its nineteenth year.

Wednesday, November 28, 2018, San Francisco

At home.

Had the weird experience yesterday, so fresh from visiting some memory-conjured version of Scotland down in the κ -hole, of receiving an email inviting me to write a short text to accompany the Scottish artist Charlotte Prodger's contribution to the 2019 Venice Biennale. Never was attracted to ketamine as a party drug, am still in the early stages of using it therapeutically to work with the emotional investments bound up in my chronic shoulder pain (too much "carrying the weight of the world"). It's dissociative, used mostly as an anesthetic, can alter proprioceptive sense of time and space, produce visual hallucinations and out-of-body experiences.

I'm finding the visualizations to be the least interesting part of it (mushrooms and acid so much better IMO) but what I'm finding super useful is my awareness in a different way to my experientially available bio-materiality ("body" feels too organized and contained a word for what it feels like). I seem able to sense where traumatic energetic residues are held in the tissue, can make tiny little physical micro-adjustments, let that energy go. κ is becoming for me a sort of "chemical *savasana*," a heavy-duty shortcut to the yogic "corpse-pose."

Last night, watched a lot of Prodger's single-channel video work on Vimeo. Was blown away by how much her work resonates with foci in my academic working life, particularly my involvement in the Somatechnics Research Network, a transnational group of interdisciplinary scholars whose shared point of intellectual departure is the proposition that technology isn't something added on prosthetically to a preexisting "natural" body; rather, all embodiment is "always already" technologized. Any given embodiment and the forms of consciousness and identities it manifests are co-constitutive and co-emergent with particular technés and milieus. Even the form of our tool-using hominid body, with its prehensile hands, upright posture, bipedal locomotion, binocular vision, and big brain, is the evolutionary result of a particular relationship between the ability of certain stones to flake easily and

hold a sharp edge, the distance of one tree branch from another in the canopy, the flatness of the savannah, the other life-forms our ancestors could eat. There is never a “before” technology for any of us, only changing technological modalities that create different arrangements, with different capacities, between different parts of an environment, some of which we experience as “us,” and some of which we don’t. The boundary shifts.

Sunday, December 16, 2018, Oklahoma City

At Mark and Sonya’s house.

A week into a long visit with the bio-family in Oklahoma, have had little time to write. The progress of Mom’s Parkinson’s-related dementia has been accelerating since April, more swiftly since early November, and the time has come for a different level of support. We’re moving her from an assisted-living community into what’s euphemistically called memory care. Right thing to do—she’s started falling—but still hard.

Have been thinking about the Prodder essay in fits and starts. Googled “maned lioness,” and one of the first things that popped up was a *National Geographic* story about a maned lioness in the Oklahoma City Zoo. Her name is Bridgit. I went to visit her at the zoo today with my nephew, Leo, who’s trans like me. Queer- and bio-family are pretty entangled. Bridgit the maned lioness of Oklahoma City was old news to Leo and my brother’s family; they have an annual membership at the zoo and go there all the time. “Probably polycystic ovarian syndrome,” says my brother, a nurse-practitioner. My niece Camber warned me not to expect too much. “Maned?” she shrugged. “More like Elvis mutton chops than bearded lady.” True enough, I said after I’d seen Bridgit, but still, kinda cool? Camber shrugs again. “Sure, Bridgit’s cool, but life’s diverse, like us, right? No big deal? Just how it is.” This is not the Oklahoma I ran to California from.

Tuesday, December 25, 2018, San Francisco

At home.

Good to be home. In spite of all the displacement wrought by tech-driven gentrification in San Francisco, I can still take a Christmas Day stroll up Bernal Hill to stretch my legs after a plane ride and run into fabulous people. Bumped into ecosexual post-porn art activists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stevens, who live just over the hill from me, their buddy Joseph Kramer from the New School of Erotic Touch, and my colleague micha cárdenas, Annie

and Beth's holiday house guest, a transmedia artist who was visiting from Santa Cruz.

It was wonderful/painful to be with Mom. I see time multiplying for her even as its content is being subtracted: every time she awakens from a little nap it's another new day. Every time she sees me sitting in the other chair, I've just arrived from California. Every time I kiss her goodbye, I'm on my way to the airport, several times a day, day after day, for two weeks. Location is indefinite for her, as are pronouns and person. She's back at her old job, in another town. I am my brother, sister, girlfriend, myself. Sometimes she speaks of herself in the third person; sometimes she addresses me as if I were she. Such an unexpected intimacy to be found in the collapse of the maternal boundary.

Kept using ketamine while there, 3 × 100 mg sublingual tablets every few days, to check out from the family drama for a couple of hours and work on my shoulder, but also as a touchstone for sharing Mom's intensifying experience of time and space, acquiring new dimensions, immersing myself in Prodger's video work at odd hours, suturing her eye, her voice, her ways of talking and seeing into the innermost crevices of my autobiographical experience at a profoundly melancholic moment in my family's history. She speaks in voiceover of her time working in an elder-care facility, of coming out to herself there, and I nod in recognition, seeing her hands move in the motion of those down-low gay men and women who, instead of me, have been touching my mother's body to minister to her most basic needs these past few years.

She speaks of going under anesthesia for surgery and the way this fucks with one's subjective experience of time, of gender trouble and public toilets, points her camera at hillsides rampant with bluebells and purple heather and the gray chop of the North Atlantic, and I nod at all of that, too. I've been there, done that, seen that, known that, but it's different now, transformed, seen through another eye, and I think: this is how worlds are formed, kinships forged, broken, remixed, ever old and new again.

Note

First published in *SaF05*, edited by Charlotte Prodger (Argyll and Bute, Scotland: Cove Park, 2019), 19–26.



SEE BEAMS GLITTER

In one of the works collected in this gentle, fierce, and highly readable anthology of autobiographical writings, Cooper Lee Bombardier riffs on that famous line by Rutger Hauer as the android Roy Batty in Ridley Scott's dystopian sci-fi classic *Blade Runner*—a perennial touchstone for the trans perception of being uncannily different from our human cis-kin. As Batty's allotted span of life ebbs away, he yearns to convey what it means to have seen “attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion,” and to have “watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser Gate.” All those moments will be lost in time, he says, like tears in rain, when he dies. And then he dies.

Unlike the fictional Batty, the flesh-and-blood Bombardier has never been off-world, and the unbelievable things he says he's seen “are largely composed of small wonders, fleeting joys, and fragments of human behavior filtered through the lens of being seen as entirely one gender and then as another.” “In the constellations of gender I've traversed, I've seen things that people who presume gender as fixed, innate, and unmoving would never conceive of as possible.” Rather than evoking the grand pathos of dying, his words point us toward the humble grace to be found in the persistence of living. For now. Just for now.

I shared a gender constellation with Cooper a quarter-century ago in San Francisco. Those might not have been C-beams glittering in the darkness of

dykey dive bars along a pregentrified Valencia Street, but something fabulous sure lit up the night down there, back then. Bombardier was one of the bright spots, in my opinion, pretty much from the moment he hit town in 1993. I'd see him hanging out at Red Dora's Bearded Lady Cafe, in the audience for a Harry Dodge and the Dodge Brothers set at Club Confidential, and interning at Black and Blue Tattoo, where I had some of my own inkwork done. I watched him perform his debut spoken-word piece "Lips like Elvis" for the TransCentral performance series at The Lab, an experimental art incubator in the Mission in 1997, and I remember thinking that this new crop of trans and genderqueer kids was gonna be alright.

Nostalgia is an easy trap to trip on. Whenever I think about "Trans San-Frisco" in the queer '90s, I constantly ask myself whether it could really have been as cool as I remember it feeling when I was living it. And I keep coming to the conclusion that, *yeah, I think it really was*. I'd spent my teens and twenties mournful that I'd missed out on the psychedelic '60s and was still a little too young and definitely too far away from New York's Downtown to have been part of the punk scene in its heyday. For those of us who had genders that were not made for the world we grew up in, being in San Francisco in the early '90s felt like stepping through a rip in the fabric of space-time into some new dimension of possibility. *And we had torn it open ourselves*. For the first time in my life, it felt like I was where something was *happening*. That I was part of it. That we were alive, becoming free, re/making a world by how we moved through it.

I read Cooper's words in the pages of this book and take comfort in knowing that I am not alone in my sense of the consequence of that time and place. Trans SanFrisco in the '90s was a thing. Its history has yet to be written, but the essays in this book are a great place to start. They document something that was not always pretty. It was before the antiretrovirals cocktails made HIV infection something other than a near-term death sentence; friends and lovers left those of us who survived far too soon.

For the first time since Vietnam, we were in a hot war, and clearly saw the connections between the overseas violence of the American Empire and that same Empire's domestic violence toward us as queer and trans people, who were still explicitly criminalized and excluded from large swaths of life. When the Cold War ended in the collapse of the Soviet Union, an unfettered global capitalism—embodied in the tech boom—exulted in a newfound fantasy of limitlessness that started lifting real estate San Francisco toward the stratosphere; it brought the increasing unlivability of the New World Order

home, one increasingly insufficient paycheck at a time. People had to leave. Cooper did.

What I see most in these pages is not what Cooper left behind but what he took with him from those halcyon days when, as he puts it, “our permutations variegated faster than any taxonomy could pace.” A quarter-century later, I see in his mature writing a confidence that comes from knowing early in life that what is possible can sometimes become real through our actions. I see intensity, invention, playfulness, persistence, openness. I see a sense of calm. Those are powerful attributes to cultivate and share in a world in which what gender means and does still needs to change, along with so much else that needs to change and that must be survived in the meantime.

I read Cooper Lee Bombardier’s words, and I see the beams in them. Beams of a beautiful inner light. Beams of inner steel. An ineffable beaming without ground that is, for me, the essence of our shared trans-ness—not our flesh, which is but a means to life, but rather the force of the life that shines through it. I have no idea what the Tannhauser Gate might look like, but it can’t be any grander than what being trans has already shown me. I glimpse those same visions of transcendence glittering in the pages of this book.

Note

First published in *Pass with Care: Memoirs*, by Cooper Lee Bombardier (New York City: Dottir Press, 2020), ix–xiii.

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