Book Reviews

New Millennium Trannies: Gender-Bending, Identities, and Cultural Politics

by Joelle Ruby Ryan

Charlotte Suthrell, ***UNZIPPING GENDER: SEX, CROSS-DRESSING AND CULTURE.*** Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004. 220p. $24.95, ISBN 1-85973-725-0.

Helen Boyd, ***MY HUSBAND BETTY: LOVE, SEX, AND LIFE WITH A CROSS-DRESSER.*** New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. 285p. $16.95, ISBN 1-56025-515-3.

Henry Rubin, ***SELF-MADE MEN: IDENTITY AND EMBODIMENT AMONG TRANSSEXUAL MEN.*** Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003. 217p. $22.95, ISBN 0-8265-1435-9.

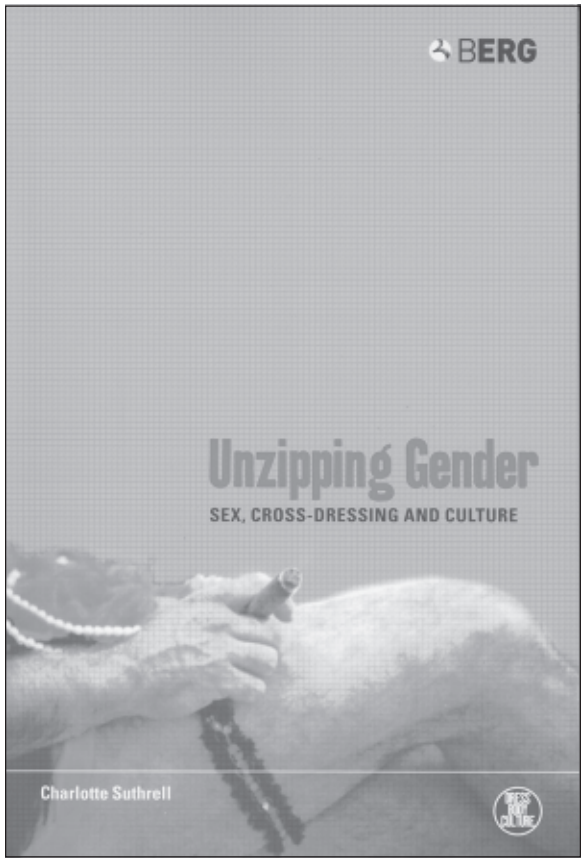
J. Michael Bailey, ***THE MAN WHO WOULD BE QUEEN: THE SCIENCE OF GENDER-BENDING AND TRANSSEXUALISM.*** Washington, DC: Joseph Henry Press, 2003. 233p. $24.95, ISBN 0-309-08418-0.

It can no longer be said that transgender issues are invisible. In fact, they seem to be everywhere. Flipping through television channels, one can see gender variance represented on sensationalistic daytime talk fests like *Jerry Springer* and *Maury Povich,* on pseudo-scientific programs like *Changing Sexes: Male to Female* on the Discovery Channel, in poignant and provocative documentaries like *Southern Comfort* and *Venus Boyz*, and even in the realm of reality TV on shows like TBS's *He's a Lady,* where "macho" straight men dress and live as women in order to vie for a cash prize. A plethora of websites deal with gender diversity, and a slew of popular films—such as *To Wong Foo, Different for Girls, Normal*, *Soldier's Girl*, and the Oscar-winning *Boys Don't Cry,* about the real-life rape and murder of transgendered Nebraskan Brandon Teena—have emerged. In addition to these media texts, a number of books that have joined the gender debate have centered transpeople's lived experiences and identity categories. These have included texts for both academic and general audiences, penned by both trans-identified and non-trans authors.

Since the early 1990s, transgender studies has begun to emerge in academia, although it has often been difficult to place this burgeoning field of study within pre-existing academic disciplines. Like women's studies and queer studies, transgender studies is an inter- and trans-disciplinary field that makes use of a variety of epistemological and methodological traditions to further knowledge about the diversity of sex, gender, and sexuality in cultures all over the globe. One of the central concerns of transgender studies has been to radically interrogate the binary system of sex, gender, and sexual orientation that so stubbornly persists in patriarchal, androcentric societies. This work is perhaps best exemplified by Kate Bornstein's brilliant *Gender Outlaw,* the first book of gender theory written by a transperson. Working in concert with feminism and queer theory, transgender studies scholars have sought to destabilize hegemonic gender categories and call into question cultural assumptions regarding the presumed unity among biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression.

While as a community we have gained increased visibility in many areas of society and culture, such as media, academia, and publishing, we must continually ask, What *kind* of visibility? And at what cost? The political stakes for texts that explicate the realities and complexities of transgender lives are enormous, particularly during this conservative cultural epoch. Further, in order to facilitate analyses that interrogate reigning systems of power, exploitation, and physical, economic, and psychical systems of violence, we must ask difficult questions about texts that explore transgen-

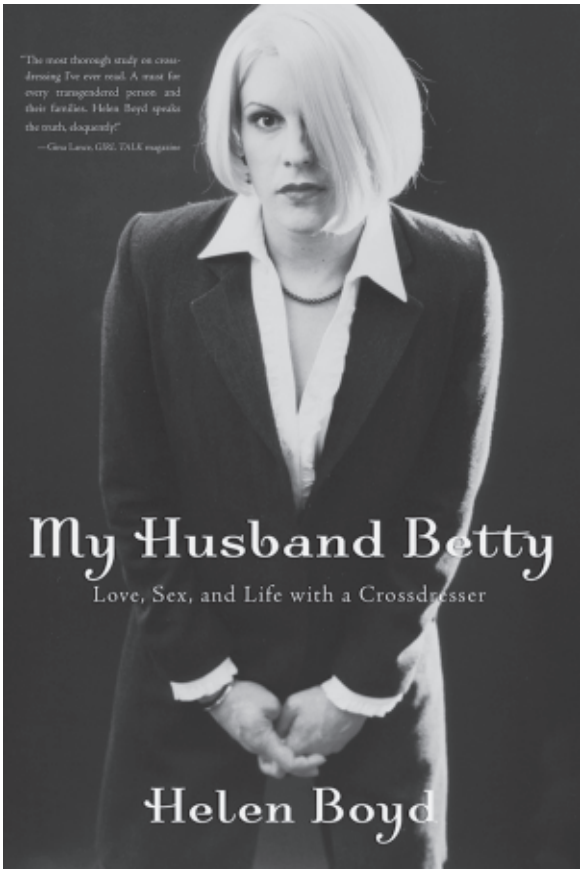
der issues. Viviane Namaste, author of *Invisible Lives,* has provided an excellent critique of studies of transgenderism in both the humanities and social sciences. She writes that "queer theory as it is currently practiced must be challenged because it exhibits a remarkable insensitivity to the substantive issues of transgendered people's everyday lives" (p.23). Namaste and others seek to promote a mode of academic inquiry that is "theoretically sophisticated, politically engaged and practically relevant" (p.1). Each of the texts reviewed below contributes to ongoing political and scholarly debates about the nature of sex, gender, and desire in the new millennium. Each achieves a different level of success in making a connection between theory and praxis.



The central objective of Charlotte Suthrell's *Unzipping Gender* is to examine the ways that culture shapes and constructs notions of gender and sexuality. In order to accomplish this important goal, Suthrell examines and compares the culture of British male-to-female transvestites and that of the *hijras* — also called eunuchs — of contemporary India. While many in the U.S. have eschewed the term "transvestite" for its clinical, fetishistic, and psychiatric connotations, in the U.K. the term has a different, more positive valence. Through an ethnography of these two groups, Suthrell attempts to center their experiences in order to analyze larger cultural questions about the nature of sex, gender, and sexuality. Suthrell conducted extensive fieldwork in both India and the U.K., consisting mainly of extensive in-person and phone interviews with individuals who identified as transvestites or hijras. Central to Suthrell's mission is an examination of clothing and its relation to prevailing cultural categories, ideologies, and contradictions. Suthrell sees clothes as a "tangible indicator of normative structures which are so taken-for-granted, so obvious, they can remain almost invisible if they stay within permitted, 'common-sense' boundaries" (p.3). Once these boundaries are violated through gender crossing, however, cultural ideology becomes readily apparent, and clothing can serve as a "material marker of ideas, notions and theories" (p.3). Suthrell uses the discussion of clothing to ground complex theoretical debates about gender and sexuality within material culture.

Unzipping Gender is cogently written and enjoyable to read. Suthrell clearly lays out her methodology (included are four appendices that reveal some of her questions and her subjects' responses) and includes detailed descriptions of some of the interviews she conducted with both British transvestites and Indian hijras. One of her chief concerns is with the conflicting ways in which transgenderism is conceived and treated in different cultural and geographical contexts. Other researchers have attempted cross-cultural and trans-historical projects in order to create historical continuity and cultural parallels between disparate "transgender" subjects. For instance, Leslie Feinberg explores transgender identity and resistance to oppression throughout history in *Transgender Warriors,* while Serena Nanda examines seven gender-variant groups across the globe in *Gender Diversity.* One of the fundamental credos guiding such work is that gender-variant people have existed throughout time and in every society throughout the globe; it is neither a "new" phenomenon nor one confined to Western, capitalist culture. Although there is scholarly merit to such an endeavor, and often positive political intention, this approach is also very problematic. Postmodernism has insisted on the importance of analyses that are localized and specific and that avoid universalizing generalizations. Cross-cultural comparisons often center Western subjectivity and "other" Third World cultures and identity categories.

While Suthrell's attempt to examine the differential ways that gender variance is treated in two cultural traditions is important and ambitious, there is very little analysis devoted to race and class, ethnocentrism, and the huge impact of imperialism and colonization on India. Given Great Britain's long imperialist rule of India, Suthrell's text could have benefited from a longer analysis of imperialism, post-coloniality, and the way hegemonic Western culture has affected sexual and gender identity formation. Further, Suthrell would do well to interrogate her own privileged social location vis-à-vis the hijra population that she studies. Suthrell calls herself "handicapped" by her "English-ness" and "white-ness" (p.76) and notes that she found most of the hijras she met "difficult to talk to, uncivil in their manner and considerably more interested in financial reward than in any notion of hospitality or friendship" (p.111). Here, she seems to have an attitude of entitlement that sadly reinstates the colonizing impulse of the British over the Indians. As Suthrell points out, attitudes toward the hijras have gone from general spiritual and cultural respect and acknowledgement to increasing derision and hostility, largely because of globalization, westernization, and secularization. Many hijras are unable to find steady employment and must resort to sex-industry work to survive. The fact that payment is foremost in their minds for the interviews reflects their economic survival instinct; Suthrell's analysis could better take these concerns into account. Despite these blind spots, however, Suthrell's text provides a fascinating glimpse into two segments of the global gender-variant community and asks pivotal questions that are relevant to all scholars of gender studies and to textile and apparel studies in particular.



Like Suthrell, Helen Boyd invites readers to enter an often secret world: in this case, that of cross-dressing. In the nearly 300 pages of *My Husband Betty,* Boyd brings readers on both a highly subjective and a more factual and universal gender journey. To do this, she discusses her own experience as the girlfriend and now wife of a cross-dresser named Betty, interweaving it with accounts of other cross-dressers and their wives as well as of transsexuals, scientists, and theorists. The book provides an overall introduction to the transgender community, but it never veers far from its true focus, which is to demystify the experiences of heterosexual cross-dressers and their wives and family members.

Boyd writes in her introduction, "I am writing this book because many of the crossdressers' wives I've met are angry and bitter… If and when they do come around to accepting their husbands' peculiarity, they only tolerate it, and rarely enjoy it" (p.13). Although the book focuses on a variety of important topics, I find most compelling its exploration of cross-dressing from the point of view of the girlfriend, fiancée, or wife. Why are so many female significant others "angry" and "bitter" about their male partners' cross-dressing? Why do they not accept it?

The answer, as you might expect, is highly complex. In reality there is a complicated continuum of acceptance/non-acceptance, and the reasons for this vary tremendously. Boyd writes that she wants her work to "be the kind of book a wife or a girlfriend can read with her cross-dressing husband or boyfriend that might lead to a new level of communication between them" (p.18). Reaching that level of communication requires, in part, that female partners express honestly how they feel about a mate's cross-dressing activities and be able to create appropriate limits and boundaries. A woman typically experiences two immediate fears upon learning that her male partner is a cross-dresser. The first is that he is a latent or closet homosexual. The second is that

he is a transsexual and will want to transition into full-time womanhood in the near future. I appreciate that Boyd clarifies these concerns but does not dogmatically dismiss them. For the most part, heterosexual cross-dressers are just that: straight men who like to dress in clothing associated with femininity, on a part-time basis. They cross-dress neither primarily as a means of attracting men or declaring a gay identity nor as a precursor to coming out as transsexual women. Wives and girlfriends almost universally fear exactly that, however, because the general public tends to automatically and reflexively link cross-dressing, or "drag," with male homosexuality. When a man puts on a dress, he is assumed to be gay. Further, with the increased visibility of transsexuals and sex reassignment surgery in media culture, many women are at least casually acquainted with the idea of men wishing to move from male to female through hormones and surgery. Meanwhile, the heterosexual male cross-dresser has remained largely invisible. Thus, many women are thrust into a whole new world that they knew nothing about, and often they feel angry, scared, or isolated. While their husbands may have had decades to adjust to their own cross-dressing, the wives are forced to confront it all at once.

Boyd's writing is direct, engaging, and blunt, especially when she discusses the wives' and girlfriends' situations and her own personal journey of being married to a cross-dresser:

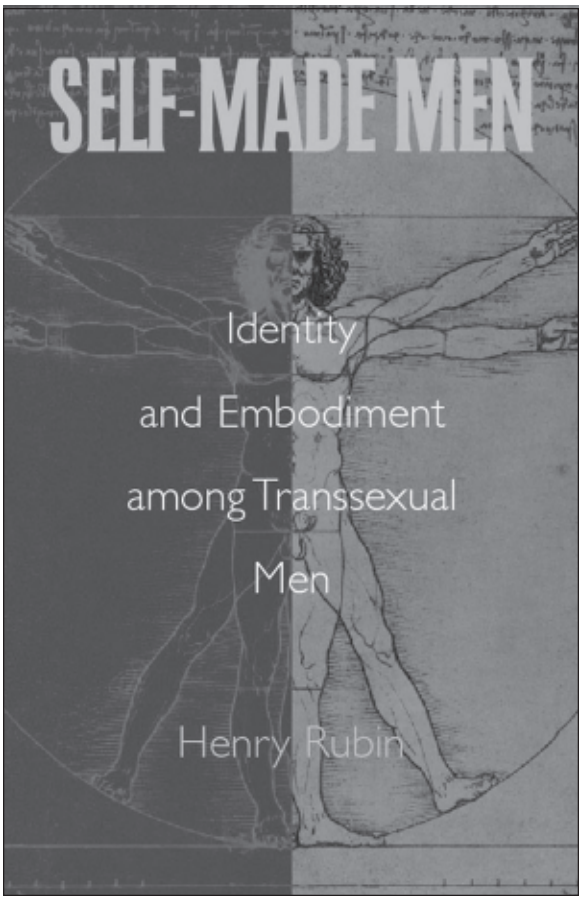
> So let's get this straight: cross-dressers' wives are not necessarily overweight or suffering from low self-esteem. We are not closet lesbians, although some of us are bi-sexual, bi-curious or have had lesbian experiences. We are not desperate, in denial, or submissive to our man's needs. The ones who are accepting do not belong to any one political party or belief. Quite conservative women have wrapped their heads around cross-dressing. They have found their way towards acceptance as I have, although we may have taken different paths. (p.58)

Boyd, a New York City denizen, reports that she has gay friends and friends of color, and that she is a feminist. She didn't expect to have any problems accepting her husband's cross-dressing, and yet she did. She is ever so candid about the many struggles she has endured in trying to accept her husband's identity and practices. She struggles openly with her expectations of her husband and of masculinity, and with how her husband's cross-dressing reflects (and does not reflect) on her in the outside world. Overall, I would highly endorse Boyd's book as a balanced, clear, and lucid account of the heterosexual cross-dressing community and the most salient issues it faces in contemporary society. It will coax readers into interrogating their own views regarding cross-dressing and sexuality.

Many people have the idea that transgender equates with "a man in a dress." Because of this misconception, the experiences of those on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum have often been ignored or disregarded. Within the last fifteen years, there has been both a burgeoning transgender political rights movement and a parallel move in academia to study transgendered people in a way that gives them agency and voice. Building on the work of such scholars as Jason Cromwell and Aaron Devor, Henry Rubin explores, in *Self-Made Men,* the lives of the twenty-two female-to-male transsexuals he interviewed in Boston, San Francisco, and New York. The book combines rich theoretical insights about transsexuals with the grounded, lived experiences of these men. Traditionally, academic treatises about transsexualism have been conducted by non-transgender people with an ideological axe to grind, such as Janice Raymond in her scathing diatribe *The Transsexual Empire* in 1979. Rubin, himself a transsexual man, shows the utmost respect for his interviewees, but still manages to ask tough, probing questions that reveal the controversies surrounding transsexualism in contemporary culture.

Rubin uses Foucauldian genealogy and phenomenology to trace his transsexual subjects. In the first chapter, he does a genealogical history of endocrinology and plastic surgery, practices that are central to his subjects' abilities to transition physically. Rubin discusses how female-to-male transsexualism emerged as a result of both the emerging science of endocrinology and the surgical treatment of war veterans. In Chapter 2, he examines the historical importance of lesbian-feminism and its relationship to transsexualism. In the years before feminism's second wave, there existed a rich history of butch-femme identities in working-class gay bar culture. Some nascent FTMs existed as butches in this framework because resources for claiming or exploring a specifically transsexual identity were lacking. With the advent of lesbian-feminism, butch-femme roles came under attack. They were criticized as aping and reproducing hegemonic, heterosexual roles, and

such roles were seen as bad for both lesbianism and feminism. Rubin traces how this political and ideological development in 1970s U.S. feminism helped to propel an increase in female-to-male identification. In the remainder of the book, he turns to his ethnographic data, while still maintaining theoretical engagement.



Rubin sees the question of embodiment as central to the experiences of his subjects. His subjects almost unanimously feel a radical incongruence between their own gender identity and their corporeality. In order to manifest their innermost selves, they feel a need to transform their bodies physically to make them recognizable to others as male. Rubin quotes his subjects extensively and allows their voices to guide us closer to an understanding of these intense feelings of gender dysphoria. He also explores what he terms the "transsexual trajectory" and pays considerable attention to the issue of sexual orientation and to how FTMs identify their sexuality before, during, and after gender transition. Finally, Rubin discusses how FTMs feel about the physical changes wrought by androgenic hormonal therapy. His suggestions for the insights FTMs can offer society and researchers about the nature of desire, sex, and gender will prove unsettling to many who advocate a socially constructed vision of gender.

While this book is highly readable, cogent, and theoretically sophisticated, it also has some shortcomings. Perhaps most important is the lack of diversity among the voices represented. Race and class greatly affect the transsexual experience, but for the most part Rubin does not discuss the impact of these social categories on his subjects, thus reifying a white, middle-class notion of transsexual subjectivity. Further, Rubin states that he was pressured by a prominent FTM to explore transsexuals who are in some way medically transitioning (with hormones and/or surgery), and thus non-hormonal and non-surgical trans voices are completely absent. Rubin's FTMs are emphatically *men,* and they are often quite essentialist in their gendered pronouncements. Although both he and his subjects show awareness of this problem, Rubin seems to elide these concerns by noting the importance of "intersubjective recognition." This serves to further concretize gender relations by naturalizing the need for humans to sex bodies visually. In our Western tradition, visuality is at the heart of gender attribution. Gender attribution is the culturally mediated process whereby someone assigns a gender to another human based on social, behavioral, and sartorial cues: type of dress, gait, tone of voice, mannerisms, hairstyle, cosmetics usage, jewelry, etc. But gender identity (one's sense of self) and gender expression (communication of gender to others) are two separate issues. Why is it necessary to have a "feminine" gender expression in order to be culturally regarded as a woman? Why are our society's criteria for gender designation based on visual criteria rather than on a communal pact or shared social agreement?

While Rubin is entirely correct to note the historical invisibility of FTMs vis-à-vis their male-to-female counterparts, statements such as "there are no natural affinities between FTMs and MTFs" (p.123) are over-determined and impede political unity between these two potentially allied groups. Rubin is to be commended for treading on controversial ground, but some of his findings are unsatisfying because he seems to accept hegemonic social constructs rather than radically interrogate them. Despite these problems, readers of *Self-Made Men* will gain a thorough understanding of many of the theoretical challenges surrounding transsexual identity, embodiment, and politics.

I will end with the book that has ignited the most controversy: J. Michael Bailey's *The Man Who Would Be Queen.* Bailey, claiming to use scientific methods, discusses sexual orientation, gender identity, and transsexualism in a book intended for a non-academic or "lay" audience. Surprisingly, the book is highly readable and engaging; Bailey invites readers along for a gender and sexual journey that explores subjects previously deemed taboo in American culture. He proceeds, however, to make gross generalizations and inappropriate stereotypes and to spread blatant misinformation throughout the bulk of the text. Given the gains of the autonomous transgender liberation movement of the past decade, his book is particularly egregious and troubling. His work might well be characterized as backlash against the gender diversity movement, and all who read it should do so with a discerning and critical eye.

Transgender is a grassroots political term that emerged in the early 1990s to refer to a "big-tent" approach to gender diversity; it's an umbrella term that encompasses transsexuals, cross-dressers (formally termed transvestites), transgenderists, drag queens and drag kings, gender-benders, and a wide array of differing identity categories that connote gender-diverse individuals and constituencies. In terms of both its definition and its inclusive constituencies, the term has overtly *political* connotations. It is not surprising that Bailey, a psychologist, generally eschews the term, or places it in scare quotes, in favor of the outdated and politically incorrect "transsexual." In addition, at root in his transsexual project is the intention to prove that there are two and only two "types" of male-to-female transsexuals—"feminine homosexual" and "autogynephilic." Anyone with even a cursory understanding of transgenderism understands that male-to-female transsexuals are an extremely diverse lot, with differing motivations, identities, and outlooks on life. Bailey, following Canadian sex researcher Ray Blanchard, feels the need to neatly categorize male-to-female transsexuals. He writes that "Blanchard's observations transformed male-to-female transsexualism from a seemingly chaotic and bizarre collection of phenomena into two straightforward and clinically comprehensible patterns" (p.158). Thus, Blanchard's and Bailey's desire for neat, orderly categories is made visible and apparent; postmodern gender "chaos" must be transformed into "straightforward and clinically comprehensible patterns." In Bailey's text, transwomen who challenge traditional notions of femininity and/or who identify as lesbians are ignored, since they do not fit the model of the hyper-feminine creature who lusts after straight, "masculine" men.

It is impossible to enumerate all of the other problems with the book, but they include Bailey's body/beauty fascism, his delimiting and oppressive feminine stereotypes, his reliance on and reification of bipolar systems of gender and sexual orientation, his sensationalizing of the transsexual body, his obsession with lurid details of transpeople's sexual lives, his shoddy "junk" science, and his problematic, paternalistic positioning as "benevolent scientist." Information has come to light suggesting that Bailey included interviews for which he did not have proper human subject review clearance (see Robin Wilson's pieces in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 20 and July 17, 2003). Bailey's lack of ethics, including his scandalous "picking up" of research subjects at Chicago-area gay bars, is among the many reasons that I strongly oppose use of this text. While other texts attempt to further information on gender as social construct, Bailey operates within a conservative, medical model of transsexualism that privileges the biological and the "scientific" and also serves to essentialize gender categories.

All of the titles reviewed here discuss trans identities in the new millennium and their relationship to dominant arrangements of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. All of them could benefit from increased attention to power dynamics, as well as to the continued oppression of transpeople in all aspects of contemporary life despite increased representation and visibility. However, with the exception of *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, all of these works make very valuable contributions to gender and women's studies, feminist and queer theory, and the explication of highly stigmatized identities and their relationships to ongoing political debates. As the push for transgender liberation continues to gather steam, books on trans issues can provide useful jumping-off points for provoking dialogue, illuminating transphobic cultural institutions, and encouraging social change.

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