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# Transitioning: An Ethnographical Study of Mid-20th Century Transgender Americans

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*Abstract:* This essay explores a number of historical and anecdotal resources in an attempt to construct an ethnography around transgender individuals of the American 1950s and 60s. Situating my study in the context of a rising national interest in the quasi-scientific field of sexology as well as the nuclear family-centered sociopolitical climate of the post-WWII United States, my analysis seeks to understand the varying lived experiences of transgender Americans and conjecture about the quality of their lives. Because the focus of my study concerns a group living before the use of the term “transgender” to describe gender identity and, indeed, before the establishment of any cohesive non-heteronormative community—as many historians will accredit the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969 with the inception of the Gay Rights Movement in America—this explication, written in the vein of the anthropological ethnography, looks at the proto-transgender community as a kind of diasporic subculture. In particular, my study pays close attention to the ways in which transgenderism was the subject of ambivalent prejudice, a term coined by Irwin Katz that recognizes benevolent (passive) forms of prejudice as well as malevolent (active) forms of prejudice. My brief essay examines a number of spaces, like the portrayal of transgenderism in the media, its treatment in the military, and its reception by the public, but recurrently it looks to the entertainment sphere, considering the dissonance between transgender performance as a comedic act and the conduct afforded to transgender individuals in actuality.

“Surgical Sex Change is ‘Eagerly’ Awaited” reads the headline of an *Omaha World Herald* column dated to February of 1957. The article goes on briefly to describe a 20-year-old individual who was released from a New York rehabilitation center on the grounds that ze<sup>1</sup> “undergo [sexual reassignment] surgery” (“Surgical Sex Change is ‘Eagerly’ Awaited”). And although the piece might appear radical in comparison to the newspaper’s more routine coverage, 1950s-era gender-nonconforming (or perhaps “proto-transgender”) Americans were at large subjected to the same sort of public speculation as the one called to attention in the *Herald’s* article, as well as with the same degree of confusion relayed by the quotation marks around “‘Eagerly.’” Furthermore, proto-transgender individuals of the mid-20th century fell prey to systemic forces like ambivalent prejudice, a social mechanism that suspends a minority group in the position of both exaltation in certain spaces and demonization in others (I. Katz 893). Spaces like drag performance, burlesque shows, and theatrical transvestism, for instance, were areas in which some aspects of trans identities were condoned—and perhaps celebrated—for civic consumption. Despite their acceptance in entertainment spheres, however, Americans of this epoch who sought to lead their entire lives with genders contrary to the sexes assigned to them at birth under cisnormativity were plagued by early notions of psychoanalytic theory and the growing field of sexology, as well as social stigma and personal bias. This type of dissonance, in which American culture upheld transgenderism as a mode of performance and as a gimmick but denigrated people who openly identified as “transgender” in the real world rendered the trans lived experience one fraught with contradictions and polarized expectations. This ethnography, while not comprehensive of the diasporic people it attempts to know, seeks to outline and examine the social forces that shaped the lives of transgender Americans of the mid-20th century and to piece together a greater understanding of their culture at large. Using historical documents as well as primary and secondary sources, this essay aims to reconstruct the daily lives and social profiles of post-World War II transgender individuals as well as the difficulties they endured.

The socio-political climate of the United States following World War II is one marked by a revival of the cult of domesticity and a reassertion of the nuclear family, two qualities which reify heteronormative ideologies and traditionalistic gender roles as husbands-at-war returned home and reclaimed their positions as family heads. Against this widespread resurgence of traditionalism, proto-transgender Americans combatted their categorization as a social “Other,” but they would be without a cohesive political identity until, as approximated by transgender anthropologist David Valentine, “sometime in the 1970s” (32). However, even after the advent of the Stonewall riots of 1969—an event often thought responsible for the onset of the Gay Rights Movement—pro-homosexual groups like the Mattachine Society would reject applicants who followed “gender-transgressive models of homosexuality,” which, as a blanket statement, included proto-transgender persons (Valentine 33). But prior to this assertion, even “[t]hroughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century,”



as transgender historian Susan Stryker suggests, homosexual desire and transgender expression were often seen as a single unit (55). Men who were sexually attracted to men, as well as men who donned female clothing, were considered “invert[ed],” as people of the time used heteronormative gender expressions to rationalize both transgender and homosexual feelings. In the public eye, gays and transgender people were both considered to be “thinking like [women]” (Stryker 55). Seemingly rejected from heteronormative groups and queer ones alike, transgender Americans of the 1950s struggled to comply with a world that did not grant them visibility or protection; they became a subculture, underground and under-noticed, until the political climate shifted and historians looked back on them in inquiry.

The mid-20th century, though generally uncondusive to the social incorporation of transgender people, hallmarked the appearance of the word “transsexual” in medical discourse; Alfred Kinsey, a prominent American sexologist, referenced the emerging term and “criticized [its use] as a synonym for homosexual” (MacKenzie 41). As indicated by the aforementioned newspaper tagline, “Surgical Sex Change is ‘Eagerly’ Awaited”, early sex reassignment surgeries were popularized, publicized events. After returning to America from her “sex change” in Denmark—as the procedure had been practiced there longer than it had in the United States—Christine Jorgenson became the “first publicly recognized [American] transsexual,” Gordene MacKenzie notes in her *Transgender Nation*; the author goes on to comment that Jorgenson’s story was “the most news-covered event of 1953” (43). The same year, a movie called *Glen or Glenda* featured a character hauntingly similar to Jorgenson, highlighting the populist consumption of gender transitioning as a form of entertainment and source of intrigue (Garber 112). Unfortunately, Jorgenson’s ostensible acceptance was only testament to the disproportionate amount of other transgender citizens who were unable to undergo surgery. One reader, after following Jorgenson’s run in the press, wrote a letter to Dr. Christian Hamburger, an endocrinologist invested in transsexual research, and lamented “My pitiful little life became no longer livable in the knowledge that it was possible [to change one’s sex]” (Ekins and King 59). The implication rests that this individual became more distraught after realizing that surgery was not a financially feasible option for most transgender people of his time. Jorgenson, equipped with money (and, some might argue, male privilege), was a rare exception.

But transgender individuals of this epoch sought more than medical recognition, and for many citizens, marginalization stemmed from the psychiatric bench, not the operating table. To give their anti-trans stigma a definitive basis, transphobic American ideologies drew on the work of preeminent sexologists—like Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld, as well as the American Alfred Kinsey—who grounded their studies on transgenderism in the Freudian school of psychoanalysis that predated them. Hirschfeld’s *Die Tranvestiten*, or *The Transvestites*, of 1910 notes the American conception of transgender identities on a visit to the United States at the turn of the century, writing: “one man who simply would not stop dressing as a woman was [finally] forced to wear a



sign on his waist with the legend: 'I am a man'" (50). The processes of pathologization that came into play here—which Michel Foucault terms “[the] medicalization of the sexually peculiar”—essentially find their roots in the idea that people recognize difference, interpret the difference as harmful or immoral, and assume this difference emerges from a finite physiological or psychological referent, an ideology which resembles the Greek understanding of mimesis (Ekins and King 150). Many researchers relate Sigmund Freud’s concept of the Oedipal complex, of “penis envy” and the “castration complex,” to early constructions of transphobia because it so blatantly places gender dysphoria as the site of extreme psychological instability (MacKenzie 26). And because his theories hinged upon heteronormativity and masculinist ideas about sexuality, a bulk of Freud’s work allowed—and perhaps catered to—the dismissal and ultimate stigmatization of those who deviated from its core concepts (including both transgender individuals and homosexuals), and his ideas were made more deleterious by their popularity and widespread, international acceptance.

Because they were seen as a social and psychological “Other,” transgender individuals of the 1950s—as well as modern times—were subject to discrimination, both violent and nonviolent. In his semi-autobiographical work *Transgender Warriors*, transgender activist Leslie Feinberg begins: “I was raised in the 1950s – an era marked by rigidly enforced social conformity and fear of difference” (3). Ze likens this opposition to difference to the spread of McCarthyism and the subsequent dichotomization of political preference as well as social identity. Ze recounts that “[his parents] blamed the family’s problems on [his] difference” and that, after years of social ostracization and relentless bullying, “[ze] thought that [ze] would certainly be killed before [ze] reached adulthood” (Feinberg 6). Stories like this—and, in fact, worse than this—populate nonfiction accounts of transgender individuals of this time. Despite the prejudice, both systemic and socially driven, they faced, transgender Americans of the 1950s, the counter-culture generation, began to fight back. In May of 1959, a group of Los Angeles police officers entered Cooper’s Donuts, a queer-friendly restaurant situated between two gay bars, and began to harass and arrest its cross-dressing patrons “for no reason at all” (Stryker 89). The story, which in some ways parallels that of the Stonewall riots that would follow a decade later, continues to describe the customers who began “throwing doughnuts at the cops” and “fighting in the streets” in an en masse resistance to the officers’ discrimination against them (Stryker 90). The incident, like Stonewall, went unrecorded by newspapers and sat as a verbal piece of transgender history until researchers like Susan Stryker began to look more closely at the dawn of transgender movements.

These invisible people, though disenfranchised in nearly every other avenue, found refuge in one area of the American sphere: the entertainment industry. “Milton Berle,” an American actor, “first appeared in a dress on a 1947 broadcast,” and Leslie Feinberg—the aforementioned transgender historian and activist—recalls “cring[ing]” at the sight of his parents laughing so hysterically at the performance (MacKenzie 110, Feinberg 4). One critic comments that these “televised drag routines,” which were based in the assumption

that audiences like Feinberg's parents would find them funny, "worked to reinforce a highly gender-stratified society" (MacKenzie 111). Segments like these would usually be "resolved" in their conclusions, as the character who had previously donned drag apparel would "reveal" their "real sex"; this sort of practice would, by nature, make transvestism—used here to denote the literal donning of the clothing which signifies the opposite sex within a man-woman binary— and, ultimately, all forms of transgender identity appear performative, superficial, and laughable (MacKenzie 111). Of course, the key difference between those who performed on-screen and the transgender Americans who would watch them was that the actors and actresses were almost exclusively cisgender, essentially performing as transgender minstrels. Ironically, real transgender performers who would play traditionally "gender-bent" roles like Peter Pan, Hamlet, Romeo Montague, and a slew of other Shakespearian figures in theatrical productions were cast as cisgender characters on television (Garber 167). This introversion—that transgender actors played cisgender characters while cisgender actors performed transgender roles—perhaps serves to found the greater understanding that real, legitimized acting could, by this era's standards, only exist if an actor were portraying someone who was socially recognized. An interesting exception to this rule might prove the underground world of drag performance.

In her critical text *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber notes that, interestingly, "American GIs in World War II put on all-male shows that frequently included female impersonation scenes" (56). These acts, she adds, were so popular that the US Army actually began "officially supporting" them as a "necessity, not a frill" (Garber 56). Though often regarded as the pinnacle of masculine camaraderie, the Army supplied handbooks for their performances, including one for a particular show, *Hi, Yank!*, that reportedly details "more than eight pages of dress patterns and illustrations for soldier drag" (Garber 56). The writer also notes that these sorts of shows were intentionally spaces for drag performance, as they often performed "all-female play[s]" like Clare Booth's *The Women* (Garber 56). But, like the popularized "drag" events on television, these drag shows—while conducive for "gay GIs," who could be "courted" by audience members—were antithetical to the Army's prohibitions against "sexual inversion" at the time (Garber 56, J. Katz 617). Jonathan Katz, in his *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, documents a *Newsweek* from June of 1947 which attests that "[b]etween 3,000 and 4,000 were discharged for [the] abnormality [of inversion]"; to prove their inversion, physicians would study "their effeminate looks or behavior" and "[repeat] certain words from the homosexual vocabulary" while "[watching] for signs of recognition" (617). Transgenderism in the Army, then, was encouraged only for its use as a form of carnivalesque, exotic entertainment and, perhaps to some extent, for the enjoyment of cisgender soldiers and their own sexual wants.

For the purposes of "passing" (appearing cisgender, heterosexual, "normal"), to satisfy their own sexual desires, or to affirm their romantic feelings as others might, many pre-transgender people of this era would choose to marry. It was often the case, however,

that their spouses might not have known the complete truth about their anatomy. One woman, married to a transgender man for over forty years, was told that he had a vagina after his death and subsequent autopsy (MacKenzie 124). She reportedly told those asking that, in her defense, “intimacy wasn’t a part of [their] relationship” and that her husband would insistently “wrap his pelvis in thick medical gauze” to cover up what she understood as “an accident that occurred during the war” (MacKenzie 125). In a similar situation, a transgender man had convinced his wife that he, too, was victim to a heinous, scarring incident while serving in World War II. In actuality, he had a dysfunctional, fabricated penis created by a surgeon in an early sexual reassignment procedure (Ekins and King 76). The two had adopted children who stated at their father’s funeral: “He will always be Dad” (Ekins and King 76). Others, who were not so lucky as to fool their spouses—should they need to fool them at all—the authors add, were sometimes subjected to “legal action” and faced the “possibility of imprisonment” if their spouses were to press charges (Ekins and King 77).

Though marginalized and persecuted by those who failed to understand their varying forms of gender expression, transgender individuals of the 1950s led their lives to the fullest extent. In general, they were not reported demographically, as they were generally more concerned with keeping their anatomical identities safe and unacknowledged by the public. One researcher notes the inconclusiveness of records kept during that time and references the varying theories concerning the number of undocumented trans persons: “one in 10,000 to one in 500,” she offers; both of which, she adds, “seem disproportionate” (MacKenzie 148). They were often parts of low-wage job sectors, as “their he-she appearance” often took away from their marketability, and some like Michael Dillon were unable to use the degrees they earned because they were awarded to them before transitioning and were attributed to names which conflicted with the gender their appearances seemed to express (Devor 34). Transgender Americans of this epoch were arrested on the whims of their governing bodies, considered unfit for military service, and were even further socially demonized as harmful, inverted, unnatural people. Despite the public disapproval of them, however, they thrived in underground communities, where people of all levels of gender variance, from “butch lesbian” to “fem queen,” celebrated one another and held “drag balls” and other queer functions (Feinberg 97).

My ethnographic study of 1950s-era transgender Americans concludes that these were a culturally stigmatized group who were considered by the bulk of the American populations to be sexually “inverted” (Stryker 55). They were placed in unfavorable working classes—unless considered passable by the heteronormative eye—and thought to be mentally unstable by readings of popular psychology. They were the generation of the first American transsexual and, in fact, of the first use of the term *transsexual*, but they were also the subject of media satirization and performative scrutiny. Transgender Americans of this age were the source of entertainment for national audiences, World War II soldiers, and police forces who, without real warrant, might arrest them. Like the



historical trajectories of both those of African-American descent (and arguably of any non-White, non-Anglophonic lineage) as well as women, then, gender-nonconforming Americans faced ambivalent prejudice insofar as they were thought of as inherently less but were also commodified by the general public. This contested position—of being exoticized and made entertaining for one's differentness while being equally denigrated for the same quality—contributed greatly to the dysphoria invariably experienced by persons who, like Leslie Feinberg, internalize the satirization of their lived experience. The dynamic transgender citizens of this era were, above all, paramount in beginning the discussion of their existence and visibility in America at large; without this generation as an impetus for the ones that would follow, America might still stand a nation without the word “transgender” to describe a mode of identification and group of people. Undoubtedly, this generation's impact on 20th-century American culture influenced our more recent societal incorporation of more gender-progressive ideals and increased understanding of transgender politics.

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<sup>i</sup> “ze” is one example of a gender-neutral pronoun; for persons approaching transition, “ze” is a politically-correct way to avoid misgendering one whose preferred pronouns have yet to be decided, are undisclosed, or are simply gender-neutral. It belongs to the ze/hir/hirs pronoun set.

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