It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming, must be cared for closely.
—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

introduction

On Transitions—Changing Bodies, Changing Narratives

Personal

I spent the bulk of the first month of my transsexual transition from female to male teaching an undergraduate course on the contemporary American novel. Scheduled over an intensive summer session, the class met for almost four hours a day, four days a week. My hormone treatment, beginning the week before the course, was comparably intensive. My endocrinologist believed in shocking my body into transition, starting me up on massive dosages of testosterone and leveling these off once my body had adjusted. Under this program not only did I experience rapid dramatic somatic changes, some of these became immediately apparent. My face squared off and my neck thickened; accumulating facial "fuzz" required shaving every few days; and, while it didn't crack, my voice deepened enough to get me an invariable "sir" over the phone. Within two weeks of the course ending, after just over a month of treatment, I was thus able to begin living full-time as a man, documents all changed to reflect a new, unambivalent status.

Although the minutiae of these somatic changes might have bypassed my students, I have no doubt that I failed to cut a clearly gendered figure in the class. In the world outside academia I was already passing as male almost consistently. Yet my profile at college would have led students to expect a female teacher. For the entire month my poor students remarkably, collectively, assiduously, and awkwardly avoided referring to me with a pronoun or a gendered title. The two exceptions occurred not in speech but in writing—in the absence of my body—in the logs students handed in weekly: one "Miss," which I circled viscerally; one "he," which I left unmarked. Students seemed to sex me individually (how not to make this most fundamental of identity assignments?), so their careful avoidance must have stemmed from their failure to reach consensus as a group—perhaps even a collective sense that I was going through some kind of significant transition.

The group's uncertainty on how to read me earned my immediate sympathy. Yet in no way did I seek to resolve its predicament. I felt unable, too caught up in my own predicament, the circumstances of teaching at this most transitional point in my transition. I did not feel I could present as a man in a department in which I had been known as a butch woman for five years and that I was anyway leaving that semester. At the same time I was so relieved to be moving away from femaleness that nothing could have persuaded me to anchor myself back to it, even provisionally. The obvious alternative—to have come out as a transsexual—I thought would have rooted rather than alleviated my students' confusion and discomfort. For, in common perception, to name oneself transsexual is to own precisely to being gender displaced, to being a subject in transition, moving beyond or in between sexual difference. So I left them uncomfortably (all of us horribly uncomfortable) leaving me to my ambivalence; and as the class progressed, this not attributing me with a gender, in my experience, became more and more glaring—a kind of deafening unspoken. In this gendered nonzone, I felt too embodied (only body) yet also disembodied: for what on earth did I embody? Not surprisingly, I was massively relieved once the course was over, and I sensed students felt similarly.

Some breathing space did open up toward the end of the course, however. One student gave a dazzling presentation on Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, tracing the theme—of all things—of transition.[1] Of the novels assigned, *Ceremony* clearly frustrated students. It made them feel unconfident, uncertain of how to read. They couldn't place it: its hybrid

characters; its plot that mixes and yet refuses to merge realistic historical moment and mythic quest; the novel's genre, its shifting affiliation to a modern psychological novel and a traditional Native ceremony. Staking its value to the course topics and to her own reading pleasure precisely on its treatment of transition, the presenting student mounted an inspiring defense of the novel. She argued that it was *Ceremony*'s layered investment in the theme of transition that the class was making its stumbling block, even as the importance of understanding and pursuing transition was the novel's very point. An intermediate nonzone, transition represents the movement in between that threatens to dislocate our ties to identity places we conceive of as essentially (in every sense) secure. Transition provokes discomfort, anxiety—both for the subject in transition and for the other in the encounter; it pushes up against the very feasibility of identity. Yet transition is also necessary for identity's continuity; it is that which moves us on.

Does it even need saying how I heard her presentation as a poignant metacommentary on my own dislocation in the course? With uncanny precision she appeared to cut through (and reveal in cross-section) the thick layers of anxiety that had coated our discussions. Even when she added an autobiographical postscript to her presentation, I found it impossible to disown or disembody transition. Revealing her entanglement in her interpretation of the novel and the class reading, the student described ***her own*** status as transitional: in her identity, consciously and complexly in between Native, Spanish, and Irish cultural heritages; and at this period of her life. My course marked her transition from college to beginning graduate school the following semester; it was part of her transition to making this kind of reading and thinking her career.

Instead of moving me away from my personal through hers, my student's revelation brought into relief (again, in my perspective) my own silence. My body had brought transition to the surface, embodied it as transsexual bodies in a disconcertingly literal way not unlike bodies "in between" racial difference do. Unlike my articulate student, however, I had remained unable to remark on, to reassure, or to confront others over my in-betweenness. In part I felt as though my experience of transition, my very movement in between, obturated any expression of my transsexuality, exceeded the grounds of its own speakability. But the difference between us—the fact of my student's "coming out" and my not—was also informed by the relation our respective bodies found to the narratives we were reading: by what we, as a class, had set up as speakable

material. Her autobiographical voicing was patently prompted and supported by our reading of narratives of cultural crossing. If in contrast my body remained as unspeakable for me as it was unreadable for students, it was in part because narratives of sexual crossing lay outside our designated subject matter. Indeed, such narratives had yet to be formed into any kind of equivalent critical tradition.

Reading the narratives that follow here into the beginnings of such a tradition, this book works as a deferred return in writing to that absent act of articulation: so much easier with the body framed in narrative; so much easier now this body has a clearer gendered location. The question of how to represent the transitions of transsexuality, of how to put into narrative its remarkable bodily trajectories, is the preoccupation of the transsexual narratives examined in the chapters that follow here—and thus of the theoretical narrative of this project—as much as it was mine in my summer class. Without doubt, my turning as critic to write on transsexual narratives represents a displaced autobiographical act: "I chose to work, academically, *on* autobiography, because in a parallel direction I wanted to work *on* my own autobiography."[2] But articulating the transitions in these texts is not only an oblique means of articulating mine; it has also been quite profoundly a way of working on mine. For transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remolding of the life into a particular narrative shape.

Material

Transsexuality consists in entering into a lengthy, formalized, and normally substantive transition: a correlated set of corporeal, psychic, and social changes. As the insider joke goes, transitioning is what transsexuals *do* (our occupation, as consuming as a career). While thoroughly interwoven in the body of my text, five senses of transition in application to the transsexual trajectory and its inscription in narrative may be separated here as a means of specifying the task of each chapter and of locking together the crucial terms of this book—body and narrative—in their relation to transsexuality.

My primary purpose in reading transsexual narratives is to introduce into cultural theory a trajectory that foregrounds the bodily matter of gender crossings. While theory is grappling with various forms of gendered and sexual transitions, transsexual narratives, stories of bodies in sex transition, have not yet been substantially read. Conceiving of tran-

sition first in a conceptual sense, I contend that we must make changes to our theoretical paradigms if we are to make room for the materiality of transsexual narratives. In the second and most substantial sense, I use transition to denote this ontological condition of transsexuality: the term transsexuals use to describe the physical, social, and psychic transformations that constitute transsexuality. In this sense I seek to substantiate transsexual identity, to reveal the materiality of the figure of transition. Third, I enlist transition in its narratological sense: transition as the definitive property of narrative, the progression and development that drives narrative and coheres its form. Reading transsexuality through narrative, I suggest that the resexing of the transsexual body is made possible through narrativization, the transitions of sex enabled by those of narrative. Fourth, in documenting the origins of transsexuality, I use transition in a historical sense: to describe the developments that take place in and between discourses of gender that allowed the transsexual to emerge as a classifiable subject. The specific circumstances of this historical emergence underline the investment of transsexual identity mutually in soma and narrative. Finally, I consider how transition as a geographic trope applies to transsexual narratives: that is, transsexuality as a passage through space, a journey from one location to another. In this sense transition serves as a key means by which transsexuals represent their relations not only to gendered belonging but to sexual communities and politics (lesbian, gay, straight, queer, and, most recently, transgendered). These different meanings of transition—conceptual, somatic, narrative, historico-discursive, and political—provide the theoretical scaffold for my critical reading of transsexual narratives and a frame for each chapter in turn.

First, then, conceptual transitions. This book begins with the argument that queer studies has made the transgendered subject, the subject who crosses gender boundaries, a key queer trope: the means by which not only to challenge sex, gender, and sexuality binaries but to institutionalize homosexuality as queer. With the focus on the gender-ambivalent subject, transition has become the lever for the queer movement to loosen the fixity of gender identities enough to enable affiliation and identification between gay men and lesbians. My project takes off from queer theory's investment in transgender—both sprung by it and beginning with it. Chapter 1 attends to the place of transgender in the early canon of queer theory—in particular in the writings of Judith Butler, for nowhere is the pivotal function of transgender in queer studies more

evident or more intricate. Butler's interest in transgender undergoes its own transition moreover, her work moving from using the transgendered subject to "trouble" the naturalization of heterosexuality and sex to using the transsexual subject, the subject who crosses the bounds of sex, to mark the limits of the trouble the subject in transition can effect. While queer theory's and in particular Butler's focus on transgender makes my reading of transsexual narratives possible—transgender wouldn't be of the moment if not for the queer moment—this association of transsexuality with limits, and queer theory's limitations around transsexuality, make my project necessary. As Butler exemplifies, queer theory has written of transitions as discursive but it has not explored the bodiliness of gendered crossings. The concomitant of this elision of embodiment is that the transgendered subject has typically had center stage over the transsexual: whether s/he is transvestite, drag queen, or butch woman, queer theory's approbation has been directed toward the subject who crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex. Epitomizing the bodiliness of gender transition—the matter of sex the cross-dresser has been applauded for putatively defying—the transsexual reveals queer theory's own limits: what lies beyond or beneath its favored terrain of gender performativity.

Second Skins reviews and begins the task of redressing queer theory's elision of the experience of "trans" embodiment by focusing on transsexual narratives. It is imperative to read transsexual accounts now in order to flesh out the transgendered figure that queer theory has made prominent. If, for queer theory, transition is to be explored in terms of its deconstructive effects on the body and identity (transition as a symptom of the constructedness of the sex/gender system and a figure for the impossibility of this system's achievement of identity), I read transsexual narratives to consider how transition may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity. In transsexual accounts transition does not shift the subject away from the embodiment of sexual difference but more fully into it.

The first part of this book thus concerns bodies. From queer theory's deployment of transgender to disembody sex in chapter 1, I move in chapter 2 to my theory of the transsexual body: an examination of the ontological sense of transition, the actual somatic, psychic, and social shifts entailed in transsexuality. How do material reconfigurations enable the transsexual to feel sex-changed? How do transsexuals represent their experience of their bodies? Is there a substance to gendered

body image that it can motivate somatic transition? Transsexuality reveals the extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity; but it also reveals that embodiment is as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself. In representing the subject's initial absence of and subsequent striving for this feeling, transsexual narratives contribute significantly to discussions of what constitutes the "matter" of the body in cultural theory, suggesting ways in which this matter may not be commensurable with the cultural construction of identity. Documenting the claims made by transsexual autobiographers about gendered embodiment before, during, and after transition, this chapter is my attempt to read individual corporeal experience back into theories of "the" body. As such, it is my most tentative chapter; for the task of addressing how the material flesh may resist its cultural inscription, because it goes against the flow of theory's insistence on the cultural constructedness of the body, can only be carried out at first, as Lynne Segal suggests, "with humbling tentativeness."[3]

Notions of the body's constructedness have a distinctively literal edge in the context of transsexuality. The overwhelming tendency in work that does address transsexual bodies is to isolate medical discourses to the exclusion of subjective accounts and to emphasize the transsexual's construction by the medical establishment. The transsexual appears as medicine's passive effect, a kind of unwitting technological product: transsexual subject only because subject to medical technology. Janice Raymond's lesbian feminist *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* set the precedent by arguing that the transsexual is the gender-stereotypical construct (and support) of a patriarchal medical establishment.[4] Dwight Billings and Thomas Urban's sociological critique likewise insisted on transsexuality as medicine's invention: "a socially constructed reality which only exists in and through medical practice." Combining theories of the social construction of illness and constructionism in postmodern culture with the transsexual's sexed reconstruction, Billings and Urban argued that not only does the medical establishment reify the gender-disturbed into transsexuals, it commodifies gender, creating the transsexual as consumer of simulated sex who buys into "an alluring world of artificial vaginas and penises."[5] Most recently, Bernice L. Hausman's *Changing Sex: Transsexuality, Technology and the Idea of Gender*—which represents itself as supplanting Raymond's book-length study only to replicate its key points—has added the Foucauldian ingredient to this stew of constructionist theories of transsexuality.[6]

Hausman argues that the transsexual is an historically engineered subject. Her thesis is that the transsexual was produced by endocrinology from the twenties and thirties and plastic surgery after the second world war when these developments in medical technology were brought together with the notion of authentic or true gender arrived at in the treatment of intersexuality. All of these readings represent the transsexual as archetypal constructed subject *because of* his or her medical construction. The literal somatic constructions of sex reassignment have been shunted all too automatically into the transsexual's culturo-technological construction.

Constructionist theories of transsexuality overwhelmingly fail to examine how transsexuals are constructing subjects: participants and actors who have shaped medical practices as much as they have been shaped by them. Even though in one of its chapters *Changing Sex* offers the first focus on transsexual autobiography, like Raymond and Billings and Urban before her, Hausman attributes unequivocal ideological power to medical practitioners, imaging transsexuals as the "dupes of gender" (taking literally the invented category of gender identity) and duplicitous (attempting to convince everyone else that gender identity is inherent). Consistently, approaches to the transsexual as a constructed effect—whether figuring her or him as the pawn, victim, or dupe of medical technology—preclude a discussion of transsexual agency: that is, the subject's capacity not only to initiate and effect his/her own somatic transition but to inform and redefine the medical narrative of transsexuality. While Hausman mentions transsexual agency (how could she read transsexual autobiography and not do so?), it is always only in conjunction with its being "not unproblematic."[7] Since she never commits really to outlining this agency, her gesture remains specious, lip service to the transsexual as prodigious object of her study. Indeed, beyond the reaches of the poststructuralist valorization (its essentialization) of construction, construction in fact connotes nothing positive. Construction in a more mainstream sense is overtly a means of devaluing and discriminating against what's "not natural," precisely to desubjectivizing the subject and—in the context of transsexuality—to invalidating the subject's claims to speak from legitimate feelings of gendered difference. "Transphobia" (literally, the fear of the subject in transition), the stigmatization of transsexuals as not "real men" and "real women," turns on this conception of transsexuals as constructed in some more literal way than nontranssexuals—the

Frankensteins of modern technology's experiments with sexual difference. Since their arguments merely recycle this popular stereotype into theory, what feminist Carroll Riddell writes with wonderful directness of *The Transsexual Empire* may be said of all of these theoretical narratives equally: "My living space is threatened by this book."[8]

Second Skins attempts to recreate the "living space" of transsexuals in cultural theory by reading the transsexual as authorial subject. Prioritizing transsexuals' own accounts over the medicodiscursive texts, I suggest that transsexual narratives place us in a stronger position to understand how dynamic and complex are the relations of authorship and authorization between clinicians and transsexuals and to reexamine the whole problematic of the subject's construction in postmodern theory. The second half of this book attends to narrative, to the ways in which transsexuals have authored their plots in dialogue with medical discourse. In the third sense of transition as narrative, chapter 3 considers how transsexuality is a matter of constructing a transsexual narrative *before* being constructed through technology. The transsexual's capacity to narrativize the embodiment of his/her condition, to tell a coherent story of transsexual experience, is required by the doctors before their authorization of the subject's transition. As they remain invested in the therapeutic/analytic origins of the transsexual story, published transsexual autobiographies underline the continuing importance of narrative for transsexual subjectivity: where transsexuality would heal the gendered split of transsexuality, the form of autobiography would heal the rupture in gendered plots. Narrative is not only the bridge to embodiment but a way of making sense of transition, the link between locations: the transition itself.

The transsexual was not officially "invented" until 1949 when David Cauldwell diagnosed as a "psychopathic transexual" a female who identified as a man and wrote to Cauldwell seeking treatment with hormones and surgery.[9] In 1953 Harry Benjamin began to outline what would become in the psychiatric and medical arena the foundational theory of "transsexualism." His first formulations emphasize its distinctiveness from transvestism on the one hand (transsexuality is concerned more severely with body not dress)[10] and homosexuality on the other (transsexuality is concerned with sex and gender and not sexuality, in spite of that misleading suffix).[11] Yet was transsexual subjectivity simultaneous with its discursive naming, as absolutist constructionist theories would have it? Arguing that it was not, that this naming of transsexuality was

rather a response to preexistent transsexual identity patterns and indeed embodiments, chapter 4 examines the historical transitions around the body, gender, and sexuality that made possible the official emergence of transsexual subjectivity. The discourse of inversion in turn-of-the-century sexology, its medicalization of transgender in the body, provided the significant threshold under which the transsexual as a sex-changeable and indeed sex-changed subject could make his/her first appearance. Sexology's case histories reveal subjects seeking out (and sometimes achieving) somatic transitions before the invention of the transsexual as a discursive subject, before sex hormones and plastic surgery had been decided by clinicians as treatment for the condition—indeed, before the condition had even been recognized as such. The first transsexual to effect a full somatic transition (surgery and hormones) did so several years before the medical diagnosis was written. Female-to-male Michael Dillon convinced a doctor to prescribe testosterone pills in 1939; underwent a double mastectomy in 1942; and began in 1945 a series of operations to construct the first female-to-male phalloplasty, effectively harnessing this technology for transsexuality and shaping the female-to-male narrative. Like other personal accounts, Dillon's story is significant for demonstrating how transsexuality constitutes an active subjectivity that cannot be reduced to either technological or discursive effect.[12]

Lesbian and gay historians have read sexology's cross-gender taxonomies as the medicalization of homosexuality. In so doing, they have dismissed as heterocentric constructs for homosexuality both its transgendered paradigms and its rendering of identity as embodied and diagnosable. However, individual case histories validate both the sexologists' prioritization of the categories of cross-gender identification over those of same-sex desire and their sense of the embodiment of this transgender condition; among the case histories of sexual inverts, we find our first transsexual narratives. If sexology's medicalization represents the bogy in the modern history of homosexuality, I argue that for transsexuals sexology in fact represents the crucial medicalization of transgender, the transitional discourse necessary for enabling the transsexual to bring about a somatic transition. Chapter 4 drives home the transsexual significance of inversion by recasting the famous invert novel, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, from canonical lesbian text to foundational transsexual narrative.[13] Situating *The Well* alongside the contemporaneous sexological case histories, I read the novel to elucidate the problematics of inversion in the text and the surrounding literary critical debates as transsexual.

In the new discourse of transgender in our own fin de siècle, homosexuality and transgender, lesbian and transsexual become significantly reentangled. Another shake of the discursive kaleidoscope and new relations between sex, gender, and sexuality, some frictional, some interconstitutive, allow for yet new identities to be named. Chapter 5 reads Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* to examine, through the figure of the transgendered stone butch, the difference of contemporary transgendered narratives, the way in which this difference refolds those between transsexual and queer.[14] In my fifth sense of transition I ask: to what "home" does the trajectory of transition lead the transitioning subject? The female protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues* moves away from a lesbian origin though somatic transition but without finding refuge in transsexual man. Refusing to close on a transsexual transition, she makes of transition itself a transgendered subjectivity—of the movement in between a destination. Feinberg's departure from conventions is symptomatic of a larger political transition underway: the creation precisely of a transgender *movement*—a politics and culture of transition. If transsexual has been conceived conventionally as a transitional phase to pass through once the transsexual can pass and assimilate as nontranssexual—one begins as female, one becomes a transsexual, one is a man—under the aegis of transgender, transsexuals, now refusing to pass *through* transsexuality, are speaking en masse as transsexuals, forming activist groups, academic networks, transgender "nations." No longer typically ending transition, transsexuals are overtly rewriting the narrative of transsexuality—and transsexual narratives—as open-ended.

Ultimately, I understand this refusal to disappear as strategic, its purpose to produce transgendered and transsexual as specific and, importantly, allied subjectivities. Transgendered narratives as much as transsexual ones continue to attest to the valences of cultural belonging that the categories of man and woman still carry in our world: what I term "gendered realness." That is, transsexual and transgendered narratives alike produce not the revelation of the fictionality of gender categories but the sobering realization of their ongoing foundational power; and why hand over gendered realness when it holds so much sway? While coming out is necessary for establishing subjectivity, for transsexuals the act is intrinsically ambivalent. For in coming out and staking a claim to representation, the transsexual undoes the realness that is the conventional goal of this transition. These narratives return us to the complexities and difficulties that inevitably accompany real-life experiences of

gender crossing and to the personal costs of not simply being a man or a woman. In accounts of individual lives, outside its current theoretical figuration transition often proves a barely livable zone.

In closing this book, I read a selection of photographs of transsexuals that capture the contradictions entailed in transsexual (self-)representation in poignantly material ways. Photographs of transsexuals seek to represent the transsexual's transition, to expose in the photographic image the difference of transsexuality. Yet at the same time they also work to conceal this difference, their very purpose to show that, posttransition, we look just the same as you. The transsexual's doubled bid to the referentiality of sex and to representation as a transsexual, to bodily realness and to telling the narrative of this route to realness, is caught graphically in the photographic medium's own peculiar situation between referentiality and representation.

Categorical

If its critical purpose is to introduce transsexual narratives as a set of texts with shared concerns about transition, the theoretical purpose of this book is to call for and initiate transitions in our paradigms for writing bodily subjects. My compound "body narrative" is intended to spin out the broader implications of transsexuality for contemporary theory, to allow transsexuality through its narratives to bring into view the materiality of the body. Many theorists have recently expressed discontent with contemporary discussions of the body—in particular, with their tendency to elide bodily materiality. Elizabeth Grosz contends that the "[t]he body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory."[15] Her "corporeal feminism" is one attempt to angle the mirror so as to bring this blind spot into view. A glance at any number of new titles shows bodies are everywhere in contemporary cultural theory; yet the paradox of theory's expatiation upon bodies is that it works not to fill in that blind spot so much as to enlarge it. That the human body has become centralized in our theory is a sure sign, as Cécile Lindsay astutely observes, that "our postmodern sensibility desires to make contact with some ground, with the physical stripped of metaphysical pretensions. This physical ground would be the body."[16] The irony is that the focus on bodies as effects or products of discourse re-metaphysicalizes bodies, placing their fleshy materiality even further out of our conceptual reach.

Is this paradox about the body—the body's materiality slips our grasp even as we attempt to narrate it—our inevitable poststructuralist legacy? Certainly, in Foucault and Lacan, our key legators, materiality figures only in reference to discourse and signification: in Foucault, to institutions, technologies, ideologies; in Lacan, to language and the signifier. In neither does materiality refer to the flesh. Materiality is our subject, but the body is not our object. The body is rather our route to analyzing power, technology, discourse, language. As Somer Brodribb remarks in her materialist feminist critique of postmodernism (of which she conceives Foucault and Lacan along with Derrida as founding fathers: disembodying matter for her is a repudiation of the feminine, mat(t)er, the mother), "[w]ith the modern alchemists, the flesh is made word." We have signification without referents, and "genders without sexes."[17] Tracing the "contemporary fetishization of 'discourse'" specifically to Lacan's return to Freud, Marcia Ian argues similarly of Lacanian psychoanalysis that it has effected "the conflation of *soma* and *seme* typical of fetishism": "The body itself, reduced to being an idea—and somebody else's idea at that—joins the ranks of the unknowable."[18] The materiality of language in contemporary thought has taken the place of the materiality of the body—as in Freud's scene of fetishism the boy mistakes his projection for the referential mother. If sexual difference is where the body's materiality is most displaced as these feminist analyses suggest, transsexuality, the attempt to materialize this difference in the body, may be the matter to recall theory to the residue of referentiality in the body.

The importance of making transitions in our conceptual paradigms for thinking bodies becomes particularly clear when we examine how transsexuals have been represented in cultural theory thus far. Since the body is conceived as a discursive effect, in terms of signification, the transsexual is read as either a literalization of discourse—in particular the discourse of gender and sexuality—or its deliteralization. In operation has been a binary pivoting on the literal—surely the most repudiated category in postmodernism and poststructuralism, whether in its association with the body, experience or language. When figured as literalizing gender and sexuality, the transsexual is condemned for reinscribing as referential the primary categories of ontology and the natural that poststructuralism seeks to deconstruct: "Transsexualism literalizes the loss patriarchy tropes as woman," writes Carole-Anne Tyler. Lacanian Catherine Millot sees a similar conflation at work: "In

their requirement of truth . . . transsexuals are the victims of error. They confuse the organ and the signifier." Marjorie Garber condemns the identical collapse of signifier into referent in the language of post-structuralist theory: transsexuals "*essentialize* their genitalia." And June L. Reich dismisses transsexuality as retrogressively conformist for these reasons: "A word about transsexuality: it works to stabilize the old sex\gender system by insisting on the dominant correspondence between gender desire and biological sex."[19] If the transsexual is conceived as literalizing in accounts that seek to deliteralize the body, it is not surprising that his/her experience has been deemed worth little more than "a word" in cultural theory, that the narratives of transsexuality have yet to be carefully read.

Yet contrarily, contemporary theory has also located the transsexual on the other side of its literalism binary, reading him/her antithetically as deliteralizing the gendered body. If in the first mode of reading the transsexual is condemned for positing a sexed body before language, in the second mode the transsexual is celebrated for pushing sex as a linguistic signifier beyond the body. "[W]hat is more *postmodern* than transsexualism?" ask Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub. Their rhetorical question assumes that what is postmodern about transsexuality is self-evident: a *petitio principi*. Likewise, for Arthur and Marilouise Kroker transsexuality creates sex as it should be in our postmodern age, sex free from the body: "sex [that] has fled its roots in the consanguinity of nature, refused its imprisonment in the phallocentric orbit of gender." And for Judith Halberstam the transsexual is the apogee of postmodern identity, transition illustrating that the sex/gender system is a fiction: "We are all transsexuals except that the referent of the *trans* becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer). We are all cross-dressers but where are we crossing from or to what? There is no 'other' side, no 'opposite' sex, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don't. . . . There are no transsexuals."[20] We are all transsexuals and there are no transsexuals. Transsexuals 'r' us, full of postmodern liberatory promise, their very constructedness encapsulating the essential inessentiality, what we take for granted as the unnaturalness of the body. In readings that embrace the transsexual as deliteralizing as much as those that condemn the transsexual as literalizing, the referential transsexual subject can frighteningly disappear in his/her very invocation. Like the materiality of the body, the transsexual is the very blind spot of these writings on transsexuality. Juxtaposing both sets of readings, it

becomes clear that neatly superimposed on the literalizing/deliteralizing binary is another binary, that of the reinscriptive versus the transgressive. In so much contemporary theory this "fear of the literal"[21] (what we might term referential panic: the enormous pressure to disown, to abrogate the referent) encodes all literalizing as hegemonic ("bad") and all deliteralizing as subversive ("good"). It's become an unfortunately formulaic way of reading in a body of thought that otherwise purports to value multiplicity, difference, and the deconstruction of binaries. Indeed, it's become a way of not attending to the specificity of narratives.

Both of these binaries (literalizing/deliteralizing; reinscriptive/transgressive), and in particular the way in which they shore up the "current thinking routines of 'theory,' " come in for critique in an essay that represents an extraordinary moment in poststructuralist theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins."[22] Sedgwick and Frank argue that structuring contemporary theory is a mechanical antiessentialism, operative especially in discourse on bodies. So foundational is this "automatic" (512) or "reflexive antibiologism" (513), so much are we accustomed to awarding value proportionately according to the "distance of any such account from a biological basis," they suggest, that " 'theory' has become almost simply coextensive with the claim (you can't say it often enough), ***it's not natural***"(513). What has become most routine in theory is the evaluation of all representations on the basis of whether they reveal ("good": antiessentialist) or conceal ("bad": essentialist) their constructedness. And, as all routines are restrictive, this practice limits interpretative frameworks, effectively imposing a constraint on the variety of narratives: we are stuck with an "impoverishing reliance on a bipolar analytic framework that can all too adequately be summarized as 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic' " (500). The binary of textual effect (subversive/hegemonic) is calcified onto the binary of the subject's relations to referentiality (literalizing/deliteralizing).

Admittedly, poststructuralist theory has always produced self-reflexive critiques of its own routines (indeed, this self-reflexive self-subversion might be thought characteristically poststructuralist); and the pervasive antiessentialism on which Sedgwick and Frank fix has been this type of work's most recurrent concern, surely because "essence" (under the aegis of the literal) has been poststructuralism's most targeted category.[23] But Sedgwick and Frank's intervention is startling and exceptional in two ways: first, for the enchanting and quite essentialist affec-

tivity that characterizes their reading of the affect narratives of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, an essentiality that manifests itself in talk of the experience of sheer joy felt in the rhythms of Tomkins's prose; and second, for the essay's specific authorial circumstances. As Sedgwick's own work has been (as the essay acknowledges) significantly "responsible for [the] popularization [of theory's trends]," her critique of these trends marks an exquisite folding back of her thinking in on itself, a startling circumscription of its own former achievements (512, n. 14). For both reasons the effect of reading "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" on those of us steeped in the practices of poststructuralist theory is precisely that of the *gestalt* Sedgwick and Frank wish it to be. And this is especially true for those of us turning our dissertations into first books, a category in which I am included. For the dissertation/first book, as Sedgwick and Frank remark in singling out a scholar's dissertation-revised-as-first-book for their critique of theory's routines, is the "rite of passage whose conventions can best dramatize the economy of transmission" that leads precisely to such institutional routinizing of critical practices (512, n.14). The dissertation/first book functions in part as a sign that we recognize and can practice our discipline's "routines."

If it is within these theory routines that the transsexual has been caught up and rigidly binarized, I want to use this "disciplinary routine" to break with some of those routines. It seems clear that it cannot be adequate to reduce the complex body of work—sometimes essentialist and biologistic—that transsexual narratives represent to these two operative binaries: literal/deliteralizing; subversive/hegemonic. But so thoroughly do these frameworks imbue our current critical methods that it is impossible simply to move "beyond" them. Sedgwick and Frank's essay suggests that, as we need to resist herding our readings into the enclosure of these binaries ("binary homogenization"), we also need to refrain from reading as if they didn't matter, as if they held no sway ("infinitizing trivialization") (512). Perhaps we might begin our conceptual transitions by reading transsexual narratives to rupture the identity between the binaries, opening up a transitional space between them. This task is both required and enabled by transsexual narratives precisely as they are body narratives: texts that engage with the feelings of embodiment; stories that not only represent but allow changes to somatic materiality. Along the way the category that we will need to reevaluate most is that of the literal, of what's essential. To the extent that transsexual narratives cannot be read without our accounting for the subjective experi-

ence of being transgendered, reading them necessitates our taking at every step what Sedgwick and Frank term—it's a phrase that's been much circulated recently—"the risk of essentialism" (513). That is, to the extent that they are written out of experience, the body, sex, feeling, belief in an immanent self, reading transsexual body narratives necessitates our using these categories that we have come to believe require deconstructing a priori. Transsexuality might then be valued for providing the recalcitrance of bodily matter—what Sedgwick and Frank term the "inertial friction of a biologism" (512)—that reopens the space between the strictures of binaries and the meaninglessness of infinity, the wedge that drives specificity back into our reading of texts. The transitions of transsexuality are densely layered, unpredictable, so that, indeed, "the changing, the becoming, must be cared for closely." And in the context of that reading the anxiety that transitions bring with them might well prove what is most constructive: the very braking mechanism for slowing our critical trajectory to ensure that we read these—and from these, other—narratives of sex and gender closely and articulate their transitions carefully.