



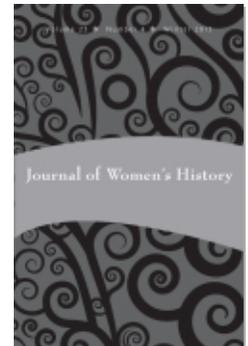
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A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography

Genny Beemyn

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A PRESENCE IN THE PAST

A Transgender Historiography

Genny Beemyn

This article provides an overview of the literature written about individuals who are referred to today as transgender people, with a focus on material from the United States. Influential studies are discussed, particularly works by trans people. The article concludes by suggesting useful directions for future research, including the need to document trans political, legal, and cultural campaigns; considering a greater range of transgender people and experiences; and specifically examining the lives of trans people of color.

Any attempt to write “transgender history” is complicated by the contemporary nature of the term “transgender” and its cultural specificity. Do we include individuals in past centuries who might appear to be transgender from our vantage point, but who would quite likely not have conceptualized their lives in such a way? And what about individuals today who have the ability to describe themselves as transgender, but choose not to for a variety of reasons, including the perception that it is a White, middle-class, Western term? Should they be left out of “transgender history” because they do not specifically identify as transgender?

Given the rich histories of individuals who perceived themselves and were perceived by their societies as gender nonconforming, it would be inappropriate to limit “transgender history” to people who lived at a time and place when the concept of “transgender” was available and used by them.¹ But at the same time, it would also be inappropriate to assume that people who are “transgender,” as we currently understand the term, existed throughout history. The best that we as historians can do is to acknowledge individuals whose actions would seem to indicate that they might be what we would call “transgender” or “transsexual” today without necessarily referring to them as such and to distinguish them from individuals who might have presented as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth for reasons other than a sense of gender difference. Admittedly, someone’s motivations are not always clearly discernible, but seeking to make this distinction is critical to present a specific “transgender history.”²

Medical professionals began to recognize gender-nonconforming individuals in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and to undertake the first studies of what would become known as transgender people in response to the growing visibility of individuals who crossdressed or lived cross-

gendered lives. These early works, written mostly by U.S. and European physicians, typically categorized those who transgressed gender norms and expectations as psychosexually disordered. For example, psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who had the greatest influence on the Western medical profession's views toward sexual and gender difference in the late nineteenth century, classified gender-nonconforming individuals by the degree to which they identified as a gender different from their assigned gender, which, in his view, corresponded to the extent to which they were mentally disturbed. He considered those who felt they were the "opposite" sex and had been assigned the wrong sex at birth to be suffering from a form of psychosis.³

Most of the literature on gender different individuals through the 1940s continued to be written by non-transgender medical practitioners, who based their research on client case studies and treated gender nonconformity as a pathology. A notable exception was physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who coined the word "transvestite" in his epic 1910 work *Transvestites* to refer to individuals who were overcome with a "feeling of peace, security and exaltation, happiness and well-being...when in the clothing of the other sex."⁴ Hirschfeld found that "transvestites" were not suffering from a form of psychopathology, nor were they masochists or fetishists. Contrary to other researchers, he also recognized that they could be of any sexual orientation (including asexual) and assigned either male or female at birth.

The one known transgender person to write about the subject prior to the 1950s was Michael Dillon, a British physician who was the first recorded female-assigned, non-intersexed individual to have taken testosterone for the purpose of transforming his body and to have undergone female-to-male genital surgeries. In 1946, Dillon wrote *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology*, a book that argued for the acceptance of people who felt that they were a gender different from the gender assigned to them at birth. Making the case that such individuals were not mentally unbalanced, he was especially critical of the clinicians who believed that they could change the sense of self of gender different individuals through therapy, when what their clients really needed was access to hormones and genital surgeries. But because *Self* was not widely circulated, and Dillon himself sought to avoid public attention, his groundbreaking arguments had little effect on the medical profession. Instead of Dillon, endocrinologist Harry Benjamin became the leading advocate in the 1950s and 1960s for "adjust[ing] the body to the mind" of transsexual individuals through hormones and surgeries.⁵

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the proliferation of clinical studies about transsexual people, following the publication of Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* and the opening of the first gender identity clinic at Johns Hop-

kins University, both in 1966. Some of this literature continued to pathologize transgender people, especially texts by psychologists and psychiatrists, like the studies of Robert Stoller and Richard Green.⁶ But the formation of the first transgender organizations in the 1960s also made possible less biased research involving non-clinical samples. At the same time, transgender individuals began documenting their own lives and communities, such as Virginia Prince's 1962 survey of readers in her crossdressing publication *Transvestia* and Christine Jorgensen's best-selling 1967 autobiography.⁷

Jorgensen's book was especially groundbreaking, as the stories of transsexual women that had been published in the U.S. until then were generally lurid exposés of female impersonators, strippers, and prostitutes with tabloid titles like "*I Changed My Sex!*" and "*I Want to Be a Woman!*" Following the success of Jorgensen's work, a wave of autobiographies of well-known, successful transsexual women were published from the mid 1970s through the early 1980s, which included Jan Morris's *Conundrum*, Canary Conn's *Canary*, Renée Richards's *Second Serve*, and April Ashley's *Odyssey*. While these texts drew substantial attention to the lives of transsexual women, the lack of autobiographies by transsexual men meant that they remained largely invisible in the dominant society. The only full-length narrative by a Female-To-Male (FTM) individual to be published in the U.S. prior to the 1990s was Mario Martino's 1977 book *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography*.⁸

A rapidly growing number of transgender groups and openly transgender individuals in the late 1980s and 1990s provided greater opportunities to give voice to gender-nonconforming people. Cultural anthropologist Anne Bolin, for example, studied a Midwestern Male-To-Female (MTF) transgender support group in the early 1980s and then again nearly a decade later, finding that members embraced a wider range of possible gender identities for themselves and others over time. In the first in-depth research on transsexual men, Aaron Devor interviewed 45 individuals about their lives before, during, and after transitioning for his 1997 book, *FTM: Female-To-Male Transsexuals in Society*.⁹

The development of queer theory in the 1980s and 1990s also brought further attention to transgender people, as literary critics including Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Teresa de Lauretis, began to deconstruct gender and examine its performative nature.¹⁰ Some trans academics and activists have criticized this scholarship, which is mostly by cisgender writers, for often using transgender people to further their theoretical positions while ignoring the lived experiences of many trans individuals.¹¹ These criticisms aside, this body of work has led to a more nuanced understanding of gender and has been instrumental in legitimizing the academic study of transgender people. Theory that is more rooted in

transgender experience has recently been collected in the *Transgender Studies Reader 1* and 2 and in the historian A. Finn Enke's anthology *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*.¹²

The first book-length histories of transgender communities were published in the 1990s. Both Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul* and Pat Califia's *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* are noteworthy for being written by transgender activists, rather than historians, and for seeking to counter anti-trans critics by presenting gender-nonconforming people as having a clear, rich past. In the case of Feinberg's text, the result is a sweeping work that assumes that "transgender people" existed in vastly different eras and cultures. The medical historians Vern and Bonnie Bullough's 1993 study *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* likewise covers a broad timeframe—from the ancient world to modern society—but, unlike Feinberg, the authors avoid creating stable, ahistorical categories for individuals who wore clothing traditionally associated with a gender different from their own. By simply recounting instances of cross dressing in different times and cultures, however, the text adds little to a specific "transgender history."¹³

A sort of middle ground is provided by another historical work published in the 1990s, the cultural anthropologist Jason Cromwell's *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities*. Cromwell does not make the kind of generalizations of Feinberg, but goes beyond the Bulloughs in seeking to understand the motivations behind cross-gender behavior to trace a history of individuals who might have been what we would call transsexual men today. He creates a framework for distinguishing between female-assigned individuals who presented as male for various reasons but who seemingly identified as their birth gender (people who might be described as cross dressers, passing women, female husbands, etc.) and female-assigned individuals who apparently identified and lived as men, which included presenting as male (people who might be more accurately characterized as transsexual).¹⁴

The two major transgender histories published in the 2000s, the historian Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* and the historian Susan Stryker's *Transgender History*, are studies of the U.S. in the twentieth century. Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed* is a comprehensive, well-researched, and insightful examination of how transsexuality has been understood in U.S. society over time and how "the topic of sex change has served as a key site for the definition and redefinition of sex in popular culture, science, medicine, law, and daily life." Meyerowitz demonstrates that transsexual history predates not only the development of the synthetic hormones and plastic-surgery techniques, but also the terminology of transsexuality itself. Stryker's *Transgender History*, part of

Seal Press's series of concise introductory texts on different topics in gender studies, focuses on trans political and social activism from the mid twentieth century to today. She details how transgender people have experienced and responded to discrimination from the medical profession, the police and legal system, and some leading lesbian feminists. While the standard historical narrative roots transgender organizing and resistance in the Stonewall Riots, Stryker shows that the uprising was actually the culmination of more than a decade of trans people challenging instances of harassment and police brutality, much of which has not been well-documented.¹⁵

While few book-length transgender histories have been published to date, the number of transgender autobiographies proliferated in the 2000s, including notable texts by Jennifer Finney Boylan, Jamison Green, and Matt Kailey. While simply being known as transsexual had made Jorgensen a celebrity in the 1950s and 1960s, the abundance of transgender autobiographies published in the last decade means that a trans person today practically needs to be a celebrity first, like Thomas Beatie and Chaz Bono, to interest a major press in their story.¹⁶ In contrast to the plethora of autobiographies, few biographies of transgender individuals have been published—the most significant are works that examine the lives of Jack Bee Garland, Billy Tipton, Michael Dillon, and Christine Jorgensen.¹⁷ Scholars will hopefully write additional profiles of transgender individuals, especially trans people of color (Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Miss Major immediately come to mind) in the near future.

An even more pressing need for future research is in histories of specific trans communities and movements. For example, Tri-Ess, a national organization for cross-dressing heterosexual men and their partners, has existed for more than fifty years and has chapters across the country, yet it has not been the subject of a detailed history. As a consequence, it is largely unknown, even in the larger transgender movement. The oldest continuing organization consisting primarily of gay male cross dressers and drag queens, the International Court System, has been considered in a handful of sociological studies, but, similarly, has not caught the attention of historians, despite being arguably the largest transgender member organization in the United States and existing for nearly fifty years.¹⁸

Another useful direction for future research would be to document the political, legal, and cultural campaigns that have led to tremendous progress in the struggle for transgender rights in the last two decades and will likely result in even greater success in the next few years. For example, transgender people have been able to shift the dominant view of the medical profession from assuming that transsexual individuals are mentally disordered to recognizing that they could be emotionally distressed because of the incongruence between their gender identity and assigned gender. Also

important to document are the strategies and organizing efforts behind the legal gains made by transgender activists and allies at the state and local levels. Prior to 2000, only one state (Minnesota) had passed a nondiscrimination law that included gender identity/expression; by 2013, seventeen states and the District of Columbia had done so. The number of cities and counties with transgender rights ordinances, similarly, has grown from three municipalities in the 1980s to more than 150 today, so that more than forty-five percent of the U.S. population is now covered by a transgender-inclusive nondiscrimination law. Among colleges and universities, more than 600 campuses have added "gender identity/expression" to their nondiscrimination policies in the last seventeen years, and many have begun to implement other transgender-supportive policies to create institutions that are more welcoming and inclusive.¹⁹

But no matter the subject, all future research needs to consider a greater range of transgender people and experiences. To date, transgender histories have focused primarily on transsexuals and transsexuality, even though a growing number of gender-nonconforming people identify outside of a gender binary, particularly many transgender youth. In surveying close to 3,500 individuals for our book, *The Lives of Transgender People*, Sue Rankin and I found that the respondents offered more than a hundred different descriptions for their gender identity, from very detailed labels, like "FTM TG stone butch drag king," to vague explanations like "no easy definition, some other kind of man."²⁰ By naming themselves in different and complex ways, transgender youth are vastly expanding the meaning of gender and raising societal awareness of the concept of gender identity.

Future histories also need to be more racially inclusive and specifically examine the lives of trans people of color. As a reviewer for several LGBT journals, I am regularly asked to provide feedback on transgender-themed manuscripts, and more often than not, these studies include few, if any, people of color. There is no excuse for this kind of "whitewashing" of transgender people today. At the same time, Black and Latin@ trans communities in the twentieth century have been understudied. While some researchers, most notably the historian George Chauncey, have discussed the rich tradition of drag balls in urban Black communities in the early and mid twentieth century, there has yet to be an extensive treatment of this culture.²¹ Nor has there been much in-depth scholarship on the contemporary ballroom culture among Black and Latin@ youth, beyond the pioneering work of the gender studies scholar Marlon Bailey on the Detroit ball scene.²²

At the outset of this article, I referred to the difficulties of writing "transgender history," whether in considering past centuries or the last decade. But with a rapidly growing number of transgender people coming out publicly today and challenging societal assumptions about gender, it

becomes even more important to try to recognize and document where we have been, so that we have a better sense of where we are going.

NOTES

¹For a discussion of individuals who lived gender-nonconforming lives in the United States (or in what would become the United States) before the development of the concept of “transgender,” see, for example, Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) and Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America’s Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

²For more on defining transgender history, see Genny Beemyn, “Transgender History,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

³Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Special Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis and Co., 1893).

⁴Magnus Hirschfeld, *Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross Dress*, trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 125.

⁵Pagan Kennedy, *The First Man-Made Man: The Story of Two Sex Changes, One Love Affair, and a Twentieth-Century Medical Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 71; Michael Dillon, *Self: A Study in Ethics and Endocrinology* (London: William Heinemann Medical Books, 1946), 52–53; Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966).

⁶Dallas Denny, “A Selective Bibliography of Transsexualism,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy* 6 (2002): 38; Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1968); and Richard Green, *Sexual Identity Conflict* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

⁷C. V. Prince, “166 Men in Dresses,” *Sexology* (1962): 520–25 and Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksen, 1967).

⁸Hedy Jo Star, “I Changed My Sex!”: *The Autobiography of Stripper Hedy Jo Star, Formerly Carl Hammonds* (Chicago: Novel Books, 1963); Gayle Sherman, “I Want to Be a Woman!”: *The Autobiography of Female Impersonator Gayle Sherman* (Chicago: Novel Books, 1964); Jan Morris, *Conundrum: From James to Jan — An Extraordinary Personal Narrative of Transsexualism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974); Canary Conn, *Canary: The Story of a Transsexual* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1974); Renée Richards, with John Ames, *Second Serve: The Renée Richards Story* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983); Duncan Fallowell and April Ashley, *April Ashley’s Odyssey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983); and Mario Martino, with Harriett, *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1977).

⁹Anne Bolin, *In Search of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1998); Bolin, “Transforming Transvestism and Transsexualism: Polarity, Poli-

tics, and Gender," in *Gender Blending*, eds. Bonnie Bullough, Vern L. Bullough, and James Elias (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 25–32; and Holly Devor, *FTM: Female-To-Male Transsexuals in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

¹⁰Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3 (1991): iii–xviii.

¹¹See, for example, Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹²Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Anne Enke, ed., *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

¹³Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Ru-Paul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Pat Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1997); and Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

¹⁴Jason Cromwell, *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 81.

¹⁵Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 285 and Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008).

¹⁶Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003); Jamison Green, *Becoming a Visible Man* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004); Matt Kailey, *Just Add Hormones: An Insider's Guide to the Transsexual Experience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Thomas Beatie, *Labor of Love: The Story of One Man's Extraordinary Pregnancy* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008); and Chaz Bono, *Transition: The Story of How I Became a Man* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

¹⁷Louis Sullivan, *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990); Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); and Kennedy, *The First Man-Made Man*; Richard F. Docter, *Becoming a Woman: A Biography of Christine Jorgensen* (New York: Haworth, 2008).

¹⁸See, for example, Steven P. Schacht, "Four Renditions of Doing Female Drag: Feminine Appearing Conceptual Variations of a Masculine Theme," *Gendered Sexualities* 6 (2002): 157–80. While Tri-Ess and the International Court System do not specifically refer to themselves as transgender organizations, they share with explicitly transgender groups the goal of challenging a gender binary in heterosexual and gay communities, respectively, and many of their members do identify as transgender.

¹⁹National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, "Jurisdictions with Explicitly Transgender-Inclusive Nondiscrimination Laws," last modified June 2012, http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/fact_sheets/all_jurisdictions_w_pop_6_12.pdf; National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, "State Nondiscrimination Laws in the U.S.," last modified June 21, 2013, http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/reports/issue_maps/non_discrimination_6_13.pdf; and Genny Beemyn, "Campus Pride Trans Policy Clearinghouse," last modified July 25, 2013, www.campuspride.org/tpc.

²⁰Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin, *The Lives of Transgender People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

²¹George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

²²Marlon M. Bailey, "Performance as Intervention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit," *Souls* 11 (2009): 253–74; and Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
